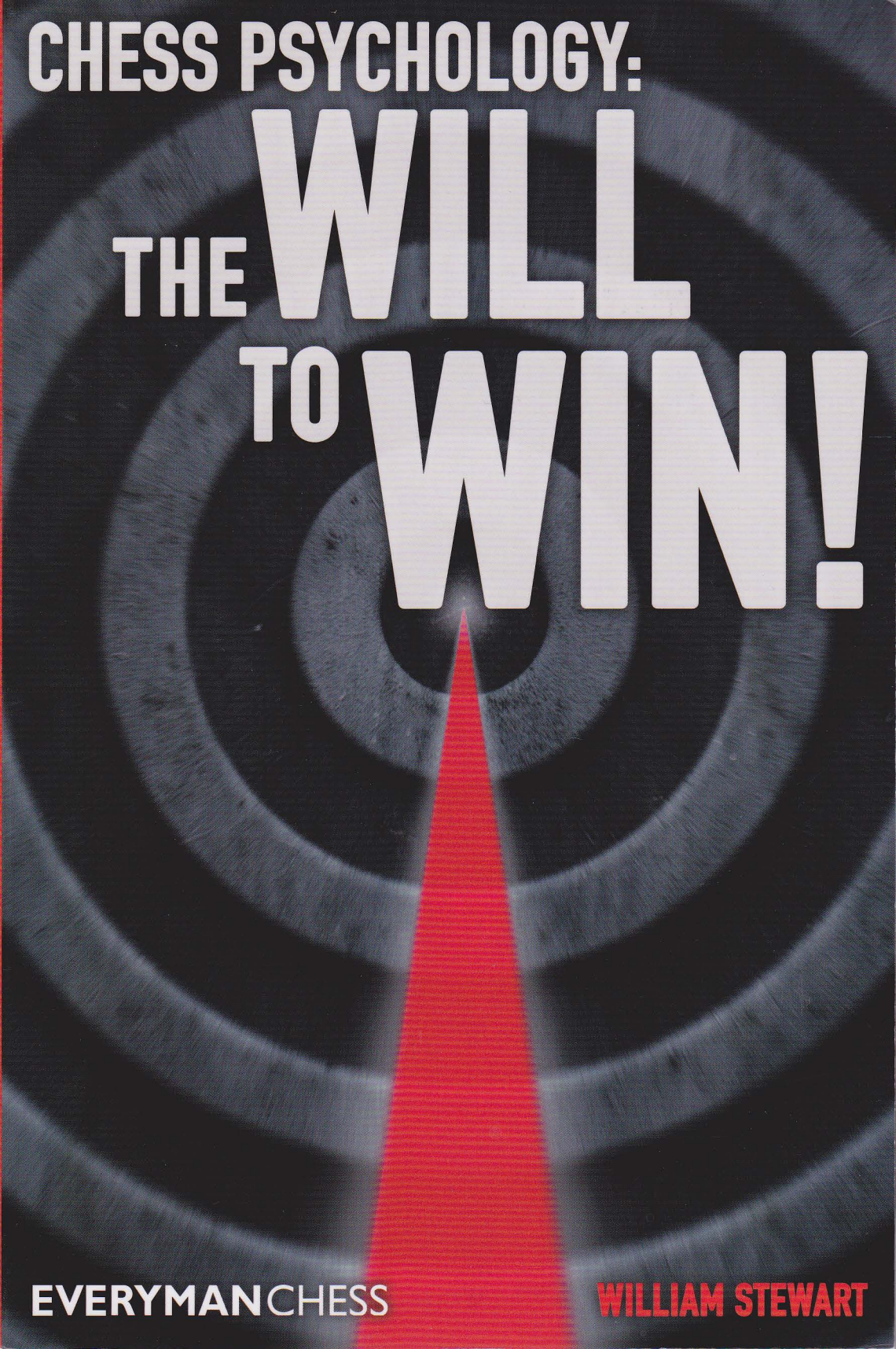
CHESS PSYCHOLOGY: THE WILL TO WIN!



EVERYMAN CHESS

WILLIAM STEWART

CHESS PSYCHOLOGY: THE WILL TO WIN!

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About the Author

William Stewart is a United States Chess Federation National Master. In 2009 he tied for first place in the under-2200 section of the World Open. He holds degrees in both Psychology and Spanish from the University of Georgia. He has over six years of chess teaching experience, and in 2011 he co-founded the websites OnlineChessLessons.net and the Spanish equivalent ClasesdeAjedrez.net, which promote and teach chess on a global level. In 2012 he launched a job site and recruitment agency called Non-StopJobs.com. His current focus is on playing chess tournaments to achieve higher FIDE titles.

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Introduction

Welcome to *Chess Psychology: The Will to Win!* – a comprehensive chess book designed to give you the tools you need to succeed in chess. This book is intended for beginner and intermediate chess players and covers a diverse range of topics while emphasizing the role of effective psychology in chess. Many players overestimate the importance of factors like how old you are, how long you have been playing, your current rating, your choice of openings, how many positions you can memorize, and the sheer number of games you can browse in 20 minutes. The real truth to improvement in chess is very simple – *identify your long-term objectives and put together a short-term set of goals that will help you consistently get better.*

The purpose of this book is not to destroy your current style of play and start building your game again from scratch. *This book is designed to help you – the beginner or intermediate chess player – organize and evaluate a customized plan for rapid short-term and sustainable long-term improvement.*

Chess Psychology: The Will to Win! will teach you to re-evaluate your approach to improvement in chess. With a resounding emphasis on deep understanding over shallow memorization, you will begin to see the big picture on getting better at chess through the eyes of an experienced master. *Chess Psychology: The Will to Win!* will teach you how to play aggressive chess from the very first move, never to stop making threats and actively searching for counterplay. After reading this book, your opponents will never have an 'easy game' against you for the rest of your life!

You will learn about the importance of aggressive psychology combined with resilient and stubborn defence. You will learn how to prepare for competitive chess tournaments and how to maximize your focus to achieve your best possible results.

This book will elevate your chess game by applying crucial elements of chess psy-

chology to all phases of the game: opening, middlegame, endgame, tactical, and positional – and is guaranteed to take you to a higher level.

William Stewart,
Atlanta, Georgia,
May 2013

Chapter One
Winning Chess Psychology

Breaking the State of Can't

The chess board represents a very accurate reflection of life. By dissecting your play, you will encounter a very strong representation of your personality and competitive mentality. In my own games, I always strive to create maximum threats and aggression – my only goal is to win and I do not care how it happens (under ethical constraints of course!). And this is exactly the type of psychology I would like to impart to my readers. Many chess players place arbitrary limits on their own progress, denying themselves the types of goals that lead to consistent improvement because they are stuck in a perpetual state of 'Can't.' A negative outlook on your skill in chess will take you nowhere but down. It is imperative that you break down these imaginary limitations on your improvement to unleash your full potential. *A positive attitude combined with audaciously ambitious goals will enable you to push the limits of your game and accomplish feats you previously did not consider possible.*

'If you always put limits on everything you do, physical or anything else. It will spread into your work and into your life. There are no limits. There are only plateaus, and you must not stay there, you must go beyond them.' – Bruce Lee

Set High Goals for Max Achievement

The concept of removing limitations is certainly not ground-breaking; however, for some reason it is still largely ignored. Many chess players refuse to even acknowledge the fact that they are placing restrictions on their advancement, instead preferring weak excuses as to why they have been stuck at the same plateau for extended periods. The only way that you can achieve your optimal results is by setting the highest goals you can think of and organizing a step-by-step plan for

reaching them. *The only way to unlock your full potential in chess is to identify positive long-term objectives and make consistent progress in meeting short-term goals that are part of the bigger plan.*

'The most successful players – at any speed – base their calculations firmly in strategic planning.' – Garry Kasparov

Step 1: Playing to Win

Many beginners are nervous about their lack of experience on the chess board, leading to a lack of confidence and anxiety during tournament play. The worst part is that many beginners just accept that they are not playing at a high level and continue on their same path to minimal improvement. For many of my students, our first chess lesson is more like a psychology session. We play a few blitz games, and I immediately start asking questions: 'Why not play a more active move here?' or 'Why are you defending a threat before it even appears?' with the student timidly responding, 'I just don't want to get crushed in the first seven moves, so I am trying to defend everything.' I used to become confused at this answer until I realized there is an easy solution to this problem. First, you have to recognize that you are playing too passively and need to become much more aggressive.

The following symptoms indicate that you may be suffering from Passive Chess Syndrome (PCS):

- Natural Tendency to Defend
- Nervous About Playing a Higher-Rated Opponent
- Mechanical Opening Play with Repetitive, Routine Development
- Indecisiveness at Critical Moments
- Inability to Attack in a Favourable Environment

The Solution Comes from Within

So first the good news: There is a viable solution to this problem. The bad news: you will actually have to invest meaningful time and energy to comprehensively change your approach and attitude to the game. *When you approach the board to play a game, your first instinct should be to attack and put pressure on your opponent.* From the very first move, you must angle to create threats and play forcing moves that your opponent will have to respond to. Don't treat the opening as the unimportant pre-season before the real chess starts in the middlegame; instead

strive to give your opponent difficulty with the most attentive plan that places maximum pressure on your opponent's game. Playing directly for the win from the first move will have a resounding impact on your overall chess game, with this pressure tangibly carrying over into the middlegame and endgame. And if you push too hard and lose, at least you go down swinging.

'I play honestly and I play to win. If I lose, I take my medicine.' – Bobby Fischer

Winning in Chess Made Easy

Winning in chess is often over-thought and underachieved. Chess players are usually very interested in the psychology of their opponent, and ironically this can lead to detrimental effects on their overall quality of play as it is easy to 'psych yourself out' and over-think simple decisions. For the experienced player, playing chess should be ingrained into your brain similar to how seasoned athletes develop muscle memory for optimal performance. The best way to approach a game of chess is with a strong mentality that cannot be distracted. Now, of course, you can only make 50 percent of the moves and must respond attentively to the threats and goals of your opponent, but your main objective should always be to play as energetically as possible.

The Secret Ingredient to Success = Energetic Play

While it's great to be aware of your opponent and their playing style (strengths and weaknesses), you don't want to delve too deeply into the details. Focusing more on your game and playing as actively and aggressively as possible will yield a very positive effect, as you will be less distracted by trivial details and more focused on playing your best chess. It is very important to always play the best possible move in any situation against any opponent, as strong players will never 'play down' to their opponent's supposed strength – instead a strong player will eliminate luck as a factor and try to crush their opponent as fast as possible to ensure success. *The fundamental key to winning in chess is very simple: play energetically from the first move to the last move. Maintaining a high level of activity will introduce consistent pressure against your opponent, forcing a constant defence that increases the likelihood of unforced errors.* This consistent pressure will also wear down your opponent's psychology, but you should not get distracted, and you should focus only on playing the best move in every single position. While there are certainly other factors that influence the result of a game, *playing energetically and creating new threats with every single move will guarantee you the best results.*

The Benefits of Flexibility

This topic seems much easier to understand than it actually is. A stubborn, unyielding mentality is a strong characteristic of any good chess player – so how are you supposed to combine that with a flexible mindset? After you play your first move, you should immediately start working on a general plan for the optimal placement of your pieces with respect to your opponent's moves. Playing the opening with an inclination towards flexibility will enable you to meet a variety of different plans from your opponent. The highest-rated player in the world today, Magnus Carlsen, is the best example of this in modern chess. He has the self-control to avoid getting too carried away with ridiculous and unlikely variations – instead he focuses his time and energy on employing lines that are solid and lead to slight enduring advantages from the opening. Carlsen is so effective at the most elite levels of chess because he very rarely gets into a bad position out of the opening. It's not that his preparation is incredibly deep and sharp (ex. Kasparov) – it's because he naturally chooses direct plans that are less committal and allow for flexibility in response to opponents' play. The result of this strategy is that his opponents are much less likely to be able to confuse the position with dazzling tactics against a loose position/strategy.

Flexibility Doesn't End in the Opening!

While the most logical and aggressive plan in the opening will get you far, it still represents only part of the big picture. An ideal opening strategy will be highly flexible, ready to meet and adapt to the changing demands of the position according to your opponent's play. This attitude should continue throughout all phases of the game, because when you begin playing extremely committal moves when your position is not actually ready for it – that's precisely when you allow your opponent to launch a successful counterattack! It's very similar to a cautious hedge-fund strategy as seen in financial investing, where if you risk little by 'investing' your time and moves in plans that are more generally applicable to the position, you will see much better results than if you employ a very narrow strategy. You should play as aggressively as possible, just make sure you're not over-extending yourself and playing too loosely. *It's very difficult to determine the most effective combination of aggression and patience, but the best place to start is by emphasizing the flexibility of plans that continuously strengthen your position without incurring too much risk.*

Designing the Perfect Chess Player

Every seriously competitive chess player in the history of the game has consis-

tently sought perfection on the board. Luckily for us, we can learn from the mistakes and successes of our predecessors to make our climb to the top of the chess world an enjoyable ascent. Designing the perfect chess player isn't a question of genetics (natural talent), but more a matter of disciplined organization, work ethic, and most importantly a very strong desire to achieve overwhelming success. Studying chess played by the greats gives us an insight into the qualities of the 'perfect' chess player.

Bobby Fischer – The Will to Win

In my opinion the best four players in the history of chess (in chronological order) are Bobby Fischer, Anatoly Karpov, Garry Kasparov, and Magnus Carlsen. Starting with Fischer, we can pinpoint the 11th World Chess Champion's star qualities that enabled him to confront the Soviet chess machine in the 1960s and early 1970s. Fischer's opening preparation was exceptional and his endgame technique impeccable. Fischer also never missed a forcing 2-3 move tactical/positional combination. It was astutely noted by GM Larry Evans that Fischer 'almost never had any bad pieces' – due to an incredibly strong understanding of the subtle and enduring positional implications of minor piece exchanges. However the one thing that made Fischer stand far above his competitors was his strong 'Will to Win' from any position. Fischer was famous for playing on in dead-even positions, even continuing to play in a king vs. king position to prove that he had the opposition! The best quality to learn from Fischer was his near-insane desire to win at all costs, constantly attempting to prove his dominance over rivals of any strength.

Anatoly Karpov – Play to Your Strengths

Anatoly Karpov himself has stated that his work ethic left much to be desired, so just how did he rise to the pinnacle of elite chess and maintain his status at the top for such a long time (nearly two decades!). There is no doubt that natural talent propelled Karpov in his quest for the chess crown, however talent alone is never enough. While many players find endgames boring and thus refuse to work on improving this crucial part of the game, Karpov's problem was the opposite – he found opening preparation to be a very dry task and thus his openings became his consistent weakness. However, Karpov was able to compensate for this by designing an opening repertoire that did not demand excessive preparation, instead striving to achieve positions in the middlegame that enabled him to play to his strength – remarkably deep positional understanding. Karpov was sufficiently intelligent and organized to recognize his weaknesses and strengths, and alter his entire game plan accordingly. While Karpov's endgame technique was definitely a

step above his peers, his success was due mainly to a rich understanding of the constantly changing positional subtleties in chess – enabling him to devise profound strategies that his opponents either did not detect or could not defend.

Garry Kasparov – The Definition of Aggression

While Bobby Fischer's 'Will to Win' greatly contributed to his success, Garry Kasparov really took it to the next level. Kasparov's unparalleled desire to win at all costs facilitated his rise to the top by allowing Kasparov to create an opening repertoire of such a high quality that it was not even considered possible before his time. Kasparov's flexibility to the changing demands of chess in the 1980s and 1990s permitted him to hold the chess crown in the most impressive fashion to date, absolutely devastating the competition by combining an extraordinary work ethic with awesome opening preparation. Kasparov's positional understanding was obviously very strong, and his endgame technique was unquestionably solid – *but what truly distinguished Kasparov was his undeniable need to win. Kasparov's extensive preparation off the board paired with his relentless aggression on the board made him one of the strongest chess players ever.*

Magnus Carlsen – Pure Pragmatism

It is undeniable that natural talent plays a role in chess development. Magnus Carlsen learned how to move the pieces at age eight and only five years later became a grandmaster at age thirteen! However, natural talent alone means nothing without a determined work ethic. Carlsen's chess success is unprecedented: his FIDE rating of 2872 (March 2013) is the highest rating in history. So what exactly has allowed Carlsen to distance himself at the top of the chess world in the most competitive era ever? Carlsen himself has admitted that his work ethic is not exceptional, but I really think his humility is getting the best of him. While Carlsen's opening preparation is not dazzling, like Karpov, he is playing directly to his strengths – fantastically deep positional understanding and technique. Carlsen's logical play allows him to maintain absolute control of the game at all times, very rarely allowing his opponent the chance to counterattack and create drastic imbalances. And when his opponents try too hard to complicate the position, Carlsen's rock-solid play frequently enables him to emerge from the complications with a clear and enduring advantage. While Magnus Carlsen has not yet won the World Chess Championship, it is clear that he belongs on this list of the best chess players ever. *The primary ingredient in his recipe for success is his purely pragmatic approach to the game, creating consistent pressure and threats against opponents, while being careful not to overextend himself.*

So Just what is the Perfect Chess Player?

The perfect chess player is yet to appear, although the four aforementioned players are certainly strong candidates. Learning from the best chess players ever, we can deduce that the perfect chess player would embody the defining characteristics of these champions – first by taking the insatiable 'Will to Win' of Bobby Fischer and Garry Kasparov to introduce constant pressure on the board and consistently force your opponent into a defensive crouch. Kasparov's opening preparation definitely sets a great example; however, for many of us we simply don't have the time or resources to replicate it. Then, we would want to learn from Karpov and Carlsen and employ a profound positional understanding of the game combined with a machine-like precision in the endgame. And lastly, we would learn from Carlsen's practical approach by leaning away from unforeseeable complications and instead pursuing more pragmatic lines where we can control the game with straightforward and direct play. The perfect chess player is always in control, combining cleanly objective evaluation with inspired creativity and computer-like precision.

Chapter Two
Quick Tips for Beginners

Quick Keys to Success

It is important that beginners do not perpetuate a low level of play in chess because they do not take the time or energy to approach the topic of improvement. Playing blitz all day on the Internet will not help you improve, but it will waste a lot of your time. In fact, playing blitz chess without a purpose can create and reinforce bad habits that make you a worse player. This is just one easy example of how failure to identify and evaluate factors that are conducive to your chess success can take your game to the gutter.

It's All in Your Head – Aggressive Psychology

As soon as you sit down to play a game of chess, you need to be absolutely focused on the goal of the game: winning. Who you're playing, how old they are, and how high their rating is – none of this matters! *A strong chess psychology embodies the fierce desire to win at all costs, regardless of any other factors.* So remind yourself why you're really playing every time you start a chess game – you are playing to win!

Understanding How to Prepare

This is a very important and often overlooked concept in chess training. It doesn't matter if you play 164 blitz games per day or like to scan the most recent top games for 90 seconds/game, you are not optimizing your time and energy dedicated to chess improvement. So take a break and contemplate your approach to getting better at the game. *Focus more on increasing the quality of your understanding in chess and less on quantity of information.*

Focus on Consistent Improvement

It's easy to become obsessed with winning and compulsive chess preparation, but

take some precautions to avoid getting too carried away. Don't focus on gaining rating points or initially setting ridiculous goals to win huge tournaments. You will achieve much more significant and lasting progress if you focus on enjoying the game and daily progress. As you focus on general improvement, your rating will catch up and your objectives will naturally be accomplished.

Pay Attention When You Lose!

Beginner chess is filled with a lot of mistakes that can be easily corrected. Small errors are frequently perpetuated and grow into much bigger problems than they should. It is imperative for the chess player of any level to constantly review his/her own games. Although it's not very fun I always force myself to spend extra time reviewing the most painful losses in order to gain insight into what went wrong and what needs to be done to correct the course. You have to be painstakingly honest with yourself as you go through your own games, stubbornly resisting the temptation to cut corners and ignore possible variations where you might have gone wrong. *Being good at chess is not only about natural talent, it's about combining hard work with honest objectivity.* Many beginners become disheartened as they are pummelled in their first serious games; however, the solution is very easy – disciplined work leads to consistent improvement.

Don't Be Afraid to Play Higher-Rated Players

Aside from all the hard work you're about to put in on your chess game, don't disregard the significance of strong chess psychology. The most important element in chess psychology is aggression. You have to continuously strive to create threats against your opponent in order to win (assuming he doesn't make a silly mistake and give you the point!). It is all too often that a beginner chess player arrives for the round at the tournament hall and elbows his way through the mess around the pairing sheet only to find that he is paired up against a much higher-rated opponent. The beginner immediately suffers an anxiety attack, pestering all of his friends to help with last-minute preparation against the higher-rated monster. The beginner arrives at the board and finds that he is unprepared in the opening, leading to further panicking/depression followed by a devastating 14-move defeat. Don't Be That Guy!

Go Big or Go Home!

The beginner chess player in the above example lost that game way before it started. No one in the history of the world has ever played 100 percent perfect chess all of the time. You always have a fighting chance to win against any player,

although at first you have to fight. When you see you're playing a higher-rated player, you should take this as an opportunity to play as aggressively as possible and make the most of the chance to play against an opponent where you can test yourself and learn. And if you lose – at least you went out swinging and will have an interesting loss to painstakingly analyse!

'If you don't win, it's not a great tragedy – the worst that happens is that you lose a game.' – Bobby Fischer

Basic Ways to Better Your Chess

Being good at chess is not solely based on natural talent; it requires a strong work ethic and organized approach to training. Don't waste your time on meticulous and unnecessary areas of your game, focus on the big picture. Everyone's chess style is different, although these tips should help any chess player improve.

Enhance Your Calm

For some reason, chess players tend to be a nervous bunch. Now we'll never really know the exact nature of the cause and effect relationship between chess and anxiety, but one thing is for sure: *freaking out will not help you get better at chess.* Whether you just lost a game you should have won, or finished in dead last place of a very important tournament – you have to stay calm and collected to identify the most efficient plan to move forward.

'As a chess player one has to be able to control one's feelings, one has to be as cold as a machine.' – Levon Aronian

Focused Efforts Yield Greater Results

This especially applies to the beginner chess player, as it can be pretty tough to pinpoint certain areas of study when there is still much to improve upon in all phases of the game. However, you can be reasonably sure that focusing your study on a narrower range of topics will be the most effective way to improve. Organizing your study routine around a centralized core of material can have a huge effect on the amount of information that is actually understood and retained, vastly increasing your Return on Investment (ROI) in terms of time and energy.

Keep It Simple Stupid! (KISS)

GM Gregory Serper told me about the KISS method when I was 15, and it completely changed my life with respect to chess. Immediately, I began to see the

world in a new light, refusing to worry about trivial possibilities and instead focusing only on the important tasks directly in front of me. I stopped pursuing solutions to inconsequential problems and began directing all of my attention towards larger goals that could be reasonably attained. The KISS method will save you infinite time and energy by focusing your efforts towards a logical route to success.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

Beginner chess players often make the same mistakes over and over again, preventing them from taking their game to the next level. This repetition of errors causes many beginner players to give up the game altogether in a brash display of hopelessness. *If you can't identify your mistakes, you will never be able to evaluate your flaws and fix them.*

Moving Too Fast

Standard time controls allot between thirty minutes and three hours of playing time to each player. *Using your time wisely is not the mark of an experienced chess player – it's the mark of a smart chess player.* Moving too fast is one of the silliest mistakes you can make, but it's also one of the easiest to fix. Many beginner players (especially young beginner chess players) have a serious problem with using their time correctly. It is very important to slow down and remain calm at all stages of the game, and avoid impulsively grabbing a piece when you think you have discovered a good idea. The solution to moving too fast is very simple: Recognize that you have a problem and be careful to exercise strong self-control in your games.

Underestimating Your Opponent

While it's great to be aggressive and attack your opponent, it's very important to draw the line between optimism and over-confidence. Underestimating the opposition happens for a variety of reasons (a much younger or lower-rated opponent, etc.) – but that doesn't make it right! It is paramount to stay focused and play the best moves possible. *It doesn't matter if you're playing against Kasparov or your cat, you have to ignore all distractions and just play the best moves.* Many beginner players like to gamble with loose/risky moves, ignorantly hoping that their weak opponent will miss the refutation. Many times these gambles work, although all too often they fail miserably – leaving you feeling a combination of guilt and confusion.

'I am trying to beat the guy sitting across from me and trying to choose the moves that are most unpleasant for him and his style.' – Magnus Carlsen

Giving Up Too Early

This is a classic beginner mistake that really has to do with chess psychology more than actual playing ability. There are a variety of reasons for giving up too early, but it always seems to happen right after an unfortunate unforced error. I've seen beginner chess players commit a foolish mistake and go on to resign only moves later in a perfectly playable position because they weren't objectively evaluating the game with a coldly calculating mentality. It's also possible that a beginner chess player will continue playing horrible moves because he is so distracted by blaming himself for an earlier miscalculation. Either way the result is the same – giving away a game to an undeserving opponent because your chess psychology is not strong enough to withstand a mistake on the board.

'Few things are as psychologically brutal as chess.' – Garry Kasparov

The Solution to Premature Capitulation

When playing a chess game it is of paramount importance to understand that all previous play simply doesn't matter and that you should only focus your time and energy on the position in front of you. *Beating yourself up over a previous error is grossly ineffective.* In fact, I don't think getting upset/depressed/angry during a chess game has ever helped someone win. It is much better to harness your emotions and keep them in check, allowing a cool-headed thought process to dominate. Once you sit down at the board, you're essentially playing with house money. The single biggest determining factor in chess is good moves, although it is equally important to understand the reasons behind those moves.

The Trick to Beating Higher-Rated Players

Winning against stronger and higher-rated players is not that hard and you'll soon see why. The biggest obstacle that prevents players from improving is most often their own psychological block. Many players check the pairings and upon seeing a player rated a few hundred points higher – they instantly assume it's all going to go down in flames.

Fearless Mentality Leads to Upsets

A fearless mentality will boost your rating and playing strength exponentially. *Forget about who you are playing*, what opening your opponent specializes in, and

any other potential distractions. Just play chess, sit down at the board and try to crush your esteemed opponent so badly that they will never want to play chess again. Do everything possible (and ethical!) to ensure that you will destroy your opponent into a hopeless depression. It doesn't matter who you are playing or how long they have been a master, an expert, a 1600 rated player, or a world-class GM. Don't be afraid to go straight for the win. I guarantee that your results will shoot up enormously if you look your opponent in the eye and make it clear – you are going to do everything possible to beat them in an embarrassing fashion.

Chapter Three
Dominate the Opening

Basics of the Opening: Develop and Attack!

Paul Morphy was the best chess player in his era, thoroughly dominating the mid-19th century with inspired attacks and sacrifices. But what really allowed Morphy to play with a style that was many years ahead of his time was his understanding of the basic principles of opening theory. Morphy's chess ideology was very straightforward with respect to the first 10-15 moves of the game: *establish control of the centre with extremely active piece-play while creating the most pressure and threats possible.*

Morphy's overwhelmingly aggressive opening style frequently led to dangerous initiatives which he converted into explosive combinations, allowing him to win many games very quickly due to his consistent pressure from the very first move. In the following famous game against the 'Consultants' (Duke Karl and Count Isouard) in Paris, 1858 – Morphy makes a threat with almost every single move, leading to ambitious sacrifices and a brilliant checkmate finish. Take special note that Morphy's attention remained focused on the centre, and that once he gained the initiative, he continued applying more pressure to exploit his advantage to the fullest.

Rapid Development + Consistent Threats/Pressure = Strong Attack

White: Paul Morphy
Black: The Duke of Brunswick and Count Isouard
Paris 1858
Philidor Defence

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3

Develops towards the centre and attacks e5.

2...d6

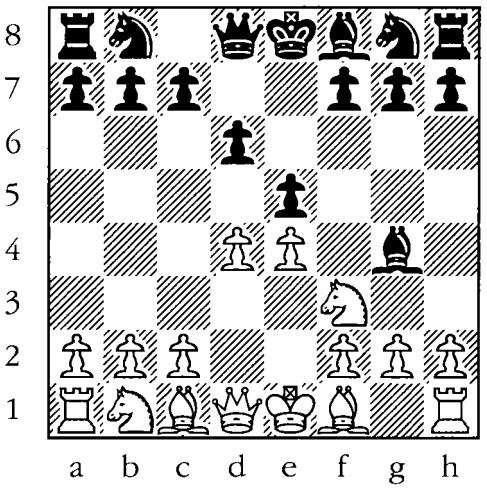
This defence is too passive. Black should play more actively with 2...♘c6 or 2...♘f6.

3 d4

White blasts open the centre and applies more pressure to e5.

3...♗g4?!

Black tries to be active and pin the f3-knight, but better is simply 3...♘d7.



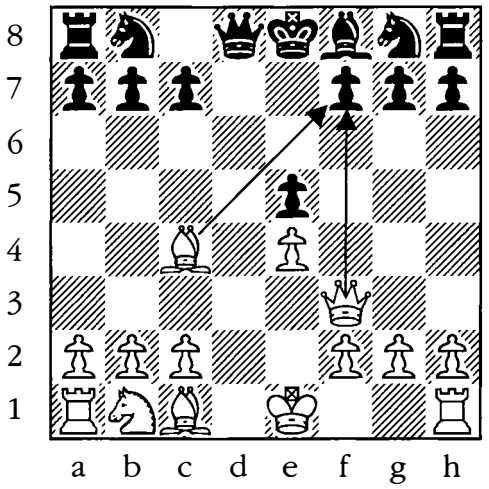
Position after 3...♗g4?!

4 dxe5

White forces Black to initiate the exchange with 4...♗xf3 – giving White the two bishops and essentially giving Morphy a free move by developing the white queen to f3.

4...♗xf3 5 ♕xf3 dxe5 6 ♗c4

Developing actively and threatening mate on f7.



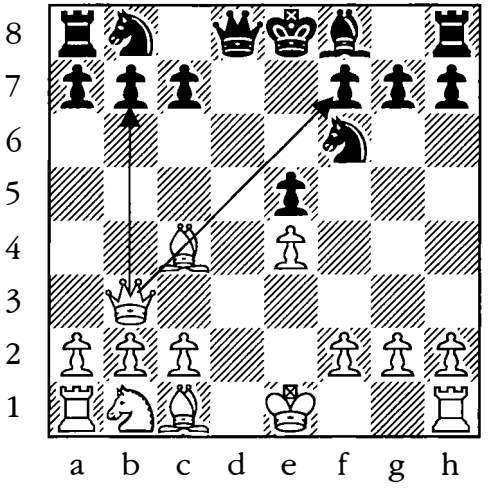
Position after 6 ♗c4

6...♘f6?!

This allows White to seize a dangerous initiative – Black must be careful now.

7 ♕b3!

Morphy plays precisely, creating a double attack on f7 and b7.



Position after 7 ♕b3!

7...♕e7

The only move to defend f7. 7...♕e7 is better than 7...♕d7 because if 8 ♕xb7 Black can trade queens and reduce the pressure with 8...♕b4+!.

8 ♘c3

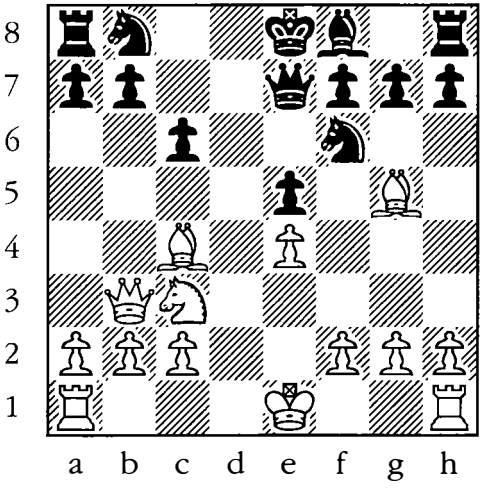
Morphy doesn't cash in his attack for the pawn on b7, preferring active development to strengthen his initiative. Also now, White really is threatening to win the black rook on a8 with ♕xb7 – as Black no longer has the check with ...♕b4.

8...c6

Black must defend the pawn on b7; also this protects the d5- and b5-squares.

9 ♗g5

White continues developing and applying pressure to Black's awkward set-up. Due to Morphy's aggression, Black is unable to develop naturally and achieve co-ordination between his pieces.



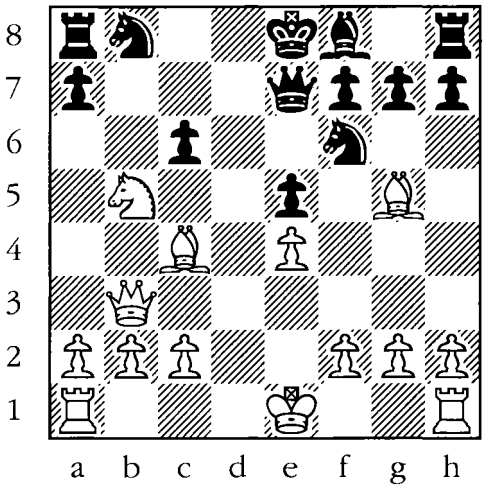
Position after 9 ♗g5

9...b5!?

In a difficult position, Black tries to gain space and push White's pieces back.

10 ♘xb5!!

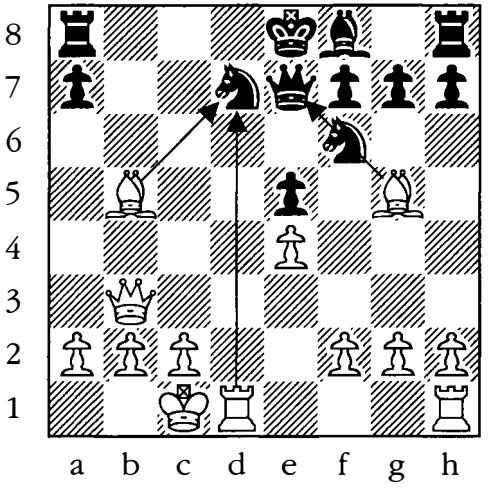
Morphy refuses to retreat with 10 ♗d3 and allow Black to gain counterplay with 10...♘d7 followed by ...♘c5. By sacrificing the knight on b5, Morphy will immediately gain two pawns and a very dangerous attack – ambitiously exploiting White's immense lead in development.



Position after 10 ♘xb5!!

10...cxb5 11 ♗xb5+ ♘bd7 12 0-0-0!

Morphy conducts the attack perfectly, smoothly bringing in his rooks to add more pressure on Black's king.



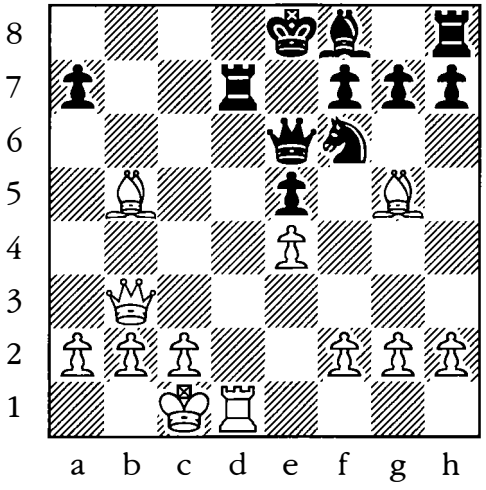
Position after 12 0-0-0! – Lines of Pressure

12...♖d8 13 ♖xd7!

Morphy goes for the kill, sacrificing the exchange to bring his last piece – the rook on h1 – into the game as fast possible, not allowing Black time to develop or react.

13...♖xd7 14 ♖d1 ♕e6

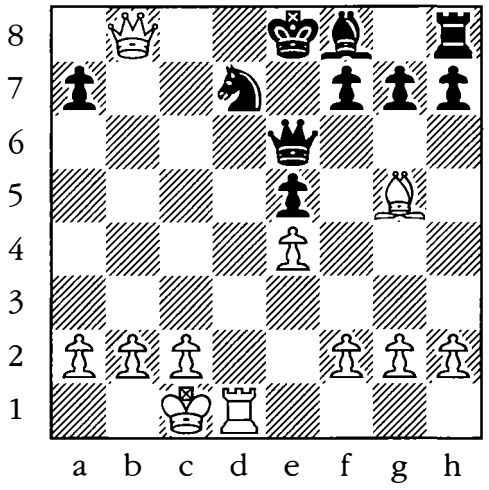
Black tries to trade queens and untangle his pieces to develop and castle; however, White's attack arrives too quickly.



Position after 14...♕e6

15 ♗xd7+! ♘xd7 16 ♕b8+!

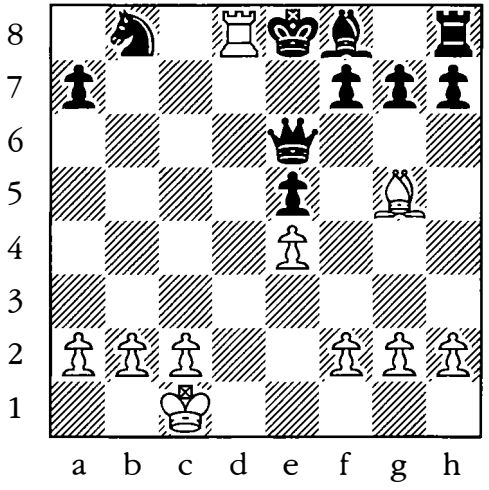
This classic deflection sacrifice is the culmination of White's previous aggression, ripping open Black's last line of defence.



Position after 16 ♕b8+!

16...♘xb8 17 ♖d8 mate (1-0)

Morphy delivers mate, in spite of his large material deficit – in the final position White has two pawns for Black's queen and knight!



Final position after 17 ♖d8 mate

Morphy was able to win this game in such a convincing fashion because he strove to create a new threat with every single move, consistently creating pres-

sure and forcing his opponent to solve tactical problems. Morphy quickly seized the initiative with pressure against Black's e5-pawn, and then switched his attention to rapid development with the help of pressure against the f7- and b7-pawns. Morphy continued building the pressure with active piece-play, and reacted to Black's off-balance attempt at counterplay with 9...b5!? by exploiting his lead in development to the fullest with the piece sac 10 ♘xb5!. Morphy concluded the game with logical precision, methodically bringing in every single piece to participate in the attack – leading to a spectacular checkmate.

Maximizing Opening Play

Picture the following scenario: a chess player sits down at the board, shakes your hand and says good luck, and starts blitzing out the first 15 moves in five minutes even though you each have 60 minutes for the entire game. Meanwhile, you take a good 25 minutes for these same 15 moves and achieve a healthy advantage out of the opening. This same opponent probably moves this fast against everyone all the time although this strategy is not very practical in standard chess. This guy is probably losing most of his games out of the opening and therefore never even gets to use his alleged 'advantage on the clock'. This rule also applies to blitz games, although to a lesser extent. Even in blitz chess, time is not the only factor to consider – and spending a proportionate amount of time on the opening is going to guarantee you the best chances of winning.

Use Your Time Appropriately in the Opening

The aforementioned example is just one of the many forms in which we see the disastrous effects of underestimating the importance of an aggressively played opening. Many players *will* consume their time appropriately in the opening but still fail to achieve anything resembling an initiative. This is because many beginner chess players will waste valuable time in the opening on trying to recall previously memorized variations in a certain line. Players also often waste time in the opening by going too deeply into unrealistic lines, or it can be more simply put as over-thinking simple moves. So just how can we make this whole opening thing work to our advantage?

Create Threats from Move One

You should always remember two simple maxims:

1) When in Doubt, Develop a Piece
2) When in Doubt, Make a Threat

Fortunately, it's even easier to do both of these things simultaneously in the opening. Playing the opening like a daily routine will not get you the results you deserve. And spending too much time in the opening by treating it like a solvable puzzle will not work either. So the solution is simple – play attentively and aggressively from the very first move. It's irrelevant if you're playing White or Black, you should still strive to develop your pieces and, most importantly, create threats to take the initiative. Entering a chess game with this take-no-prisoners mentality will have a very positive effect on your results, as your opponents won't have the luxury of easily taking control of the game against routine mechanical opening play.

Memorization vs. Understanding

So you've been studying chess for a few years now and feel overwhelming confidence in your extensive knowledge of opening theory, but for some reason you keep losing good positions in the middlegame and endgame. This is easy to shrug off, as we all know how 'lucky' the other guy keeps getting to weasel you out of that point. A few days later, you embark on an intense chess training session to prepare for the upcoming G/45 at the local chess centre, pulling out every encyclopaedia of chess openings you can find to spot the chinks in your opening armour. You spend precious energy and time reviewing the latest Super-GM contributions to opening theory, and take pride in spitting out memorized lines 20 moves deep. Equipped with all these new variations branded into your brain, you arrive at the tournament and get to work. In every single one of your games, your opponent somehow sidesteps your memorized main lines and you consistently achieve poor positions out of the opening.

Quantity vs. Quality

Sheer quantity of memorized information does not produce improvement in chess. Skimming an opening manual for lightning-fast absorption into your brain is not going to help you. You have to actually sit down and apply yourself to take the time to truly understand the reasons behind the moves, not glancing through so that you can brag about reading 63 chess books every week. In the 21st century, it's easy to become accustomed to the near-constant stimuli that is thrown at you every 15 milliseconds – *but to get better at chess, you really need to focus less on quantity and more on quality via depth of understanding.*

Opening Preparation

Beginner Chess Opening Preparation can be a tricky subject, but it doesn't have to be. There's a variety of approaches to chess opening preparations. For example,

there are Super-GMs like Vassily Ivanchuk and Hikaru Nakamura who feel comfortable playing almost any opening in any situation. And then there are Super-GMs like Peter Svidler, who almost always plays the Grünfeld Defence as Black against d4 (1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5) because he has so deeply prepared the opening that he is unafraid of running into any surprises from his opponents. But these guys are serious professional chess players, and have surely invested thousands upon thousands of hours into training and tournament play. All too often a beginner chess player will look at the biggest names in chess and try to copy their style and ideas. *It is much more appropriate to determine your style of play according to your level and the types of positions in which you feel comfortable.*

Focused Efforts Yield Greater Results

As a beginner chess player, you only have so much time and energy to dedicate to the game, so you really want to make sure that you use it wisely. The 80/20 rule in business applies just the same in chess (20% of efforts yield 80% of results). Identifying the most efficient study method and routine are critical to achieving success on and off the chess board. Preparing chess openings as a beginner player is a perfect example of how you want to spend the least amount of time and energy to achieve the maximum result. It is much better to prepare a very narrow selection of openings, so that you feel very confident every time you sit down to play a serious game. As an amateur player you want to avoid wasting valuable training time on frivolous opening choices that you will never actually employ in a real tournament game. It is very important to construct and maintain a disciplined mentality and routine with respect to chess training and preparation.

How to Design an Opening Repertoire

When I start a chess class with a new student, I like to get some background on exactly who/what I'm dealing with. After the introductory pleasantries, I like to get down to business and inquire about the new student's preferred openings. I really start to kick off the class with a question like 'So do you like to play a select, small number of openings or really more just whatever you feel like playing?' and the last answer I want to receive is 'I like to play as many openings as possible, so I know a little bit about every type of position.' You can compare this scenario to the career-savvy individual who has dedicated his entire time as a professional to advancement in one specific field, versus the guy who has worked fifteen different entry-level jobs in the last five years and is a great 'jack-of-all-trades'. Understanding the bare minimum of a wide range of different openings is not just impractical, it's grossly ineffective.

Narrow Your Focus

Taking the time to contemplate your approach to chess improvement can save you a lot of time and energy by focusing on what will really help you get better. This maxim applies even more to the topic of designing an opening repertoire, as *you want to put together a narrow game plan that is focused on results*. The beginner chess player really only needs to have three basic opening systems on hand: what to play as White, what to play as Black against e4, and what to play as Black against d4. If you can decide on three systems and maintain the discipline to focus exclusively on them, your results are going to skyrocket. And remember, *you don't want to work on memorizing the moves – you want to understand the reasons behind the moves.*

Organize a Game-plan

For most beginner chess players, it's going to be very difficult to identify three basic opening schemes that are interconnected with respect to basic concepts and fundamental strategies. Luckily for you, I've decided to make your path to chess excellence that much easier by designing a comprehensive opening repertoire that is very solid and easy to learn.

We will now examine three opening systems that overlap in ideology:

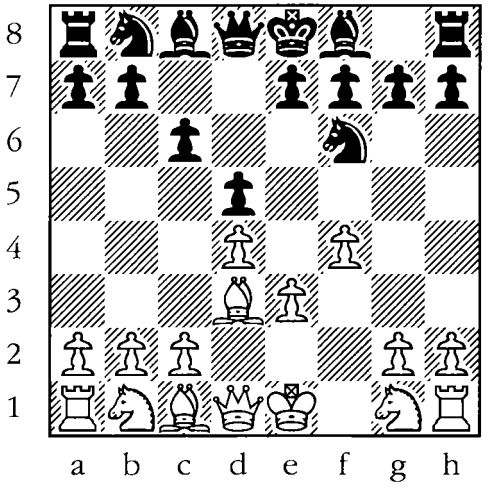
1) The Stonewall Attack;
2) The French Defence; and
3) The Slav Defence (Schallopp Variation).

The underlying principles of these openings are very similar: *the minor pieces will control the central squares that your solid pawn formation does not cover.* Whether you choose to follow my suggested opening repertoire or design your own – keep in mind that a focused approach will yield the best results.

Stonewall Attack – Sac to Attack

The Stonewall Attack is a powerful opening system by White that puts immediate and consistent pressure on Black by controlling the centre. In Part One, we will examine a classic Stonewall structure and plan.

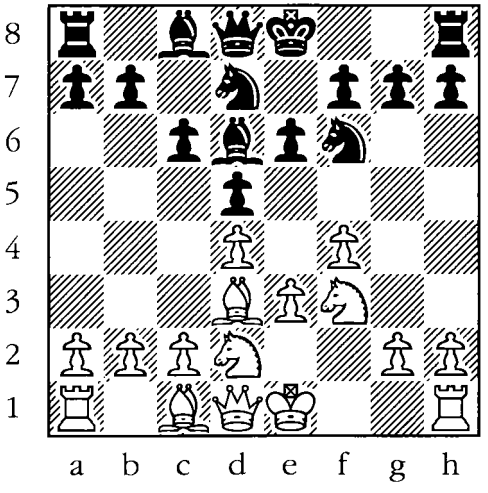
1 d4 d5 2 e3 ♘f6 3 ♗d3 c6 4 f4



Position after 4 f4

White plays an early f4 to clamp down in the centre and prevent Black from liberating his position with ...e5.

4...♘bd7 5 ♘d2 e6 6 ♘gf3 ♗d6

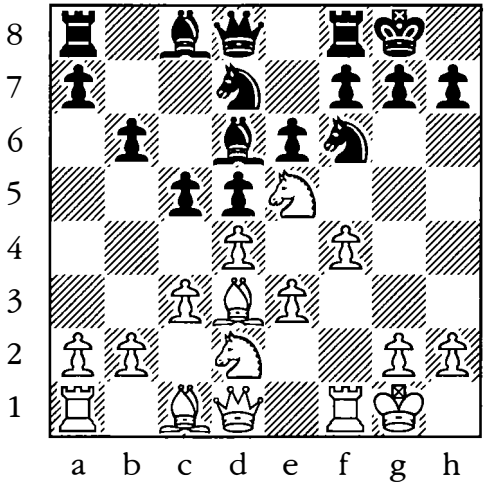


Position after 6...♗d6

With his pawns, White has established strong control of the dark squares in the

centre. With his pieces, White aims to control the light squares and prevent Black from establishing a stronghold with ...♘e4.

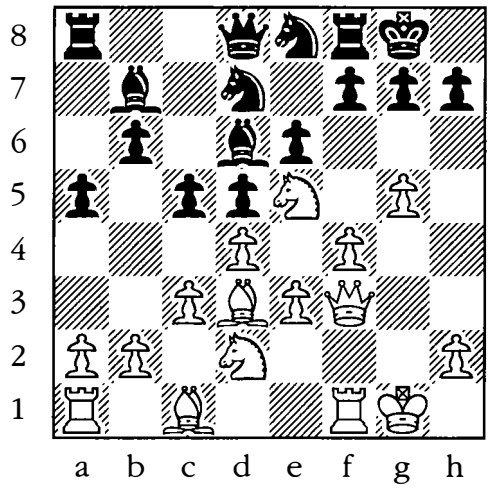
7 0-0 0-0 8 ♘e5 c5 9 c3 b6



Position after 9...b6

White maintains a very strong grip on the centre and would likely respond to ...cxd4 by Black with exd4 – opening up the e-file for White and keeping a fluid, coordinated pawn structure. White should continue trying to keep Black from playing ...♘e4 which would greatly congest White's position. Also, White should aim for a direct kingside attack by lifting his queen in the future to f3, g4, or h5. White can also employ a common rook manoeuvre in this type of position, lifting the rook to f3, where it can participate in the attack via g3 or h3 as well.

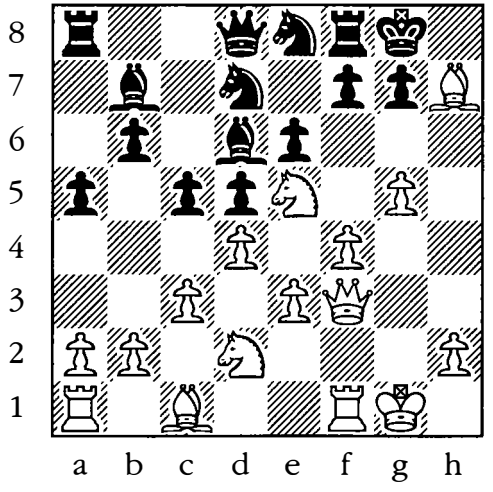
10 ♕f3 ♗b7 11 g4 a5 12 g5 ♘e8



Position after 12...♘e8

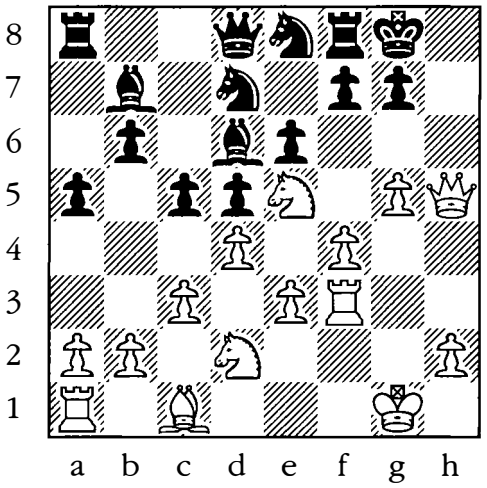
This is a very promising position for White. He has kept Black's knight out of e4 and the centre is closed. Black's counterplay on the queenside is too slow. White is now lining up a kill-shot against Black's weakest point.

13 ♗xh7+!



Position after 13 ♗xh7+

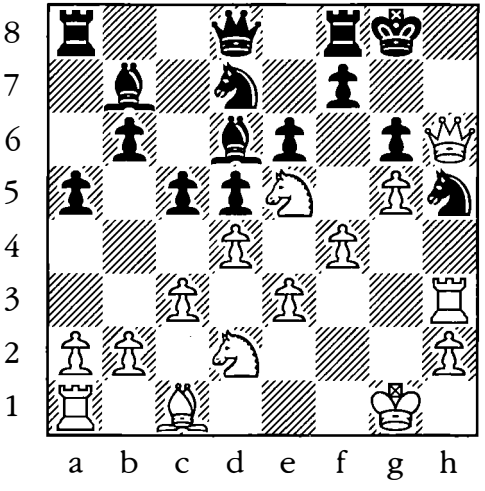
13...♔xh7 14 ♕h5+ ♔g8 15 ♖f3!



Position after 15 ♖f3!

White prepares a decisive breakthrough on the h-file by lifting the rook from f1-f3-h3.

15...g6 16 ♕h6 ♘g7 17 ♖h3 ♘h5

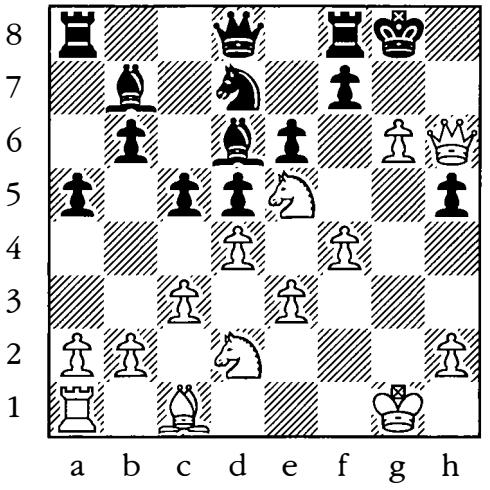


Position after 17...♘h5

It appears that Black has succeeded in stopping White's attack. However, be-

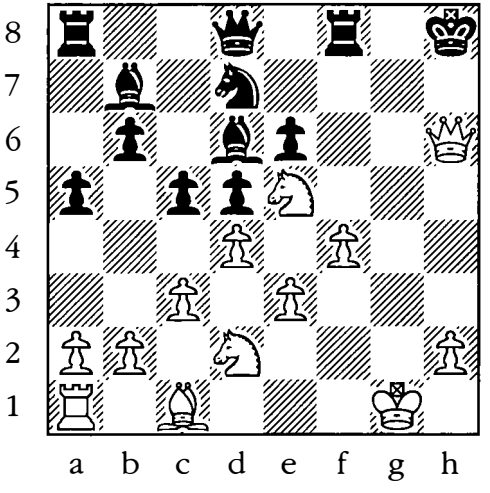
cause White controls more space in the centre, and the centre is completely closed – Black's extra material is unable to help out his lonely king. White crashes through before Black can consolidate.

18 ♖xh5! gxh5 19 g6



Position after 19 g6

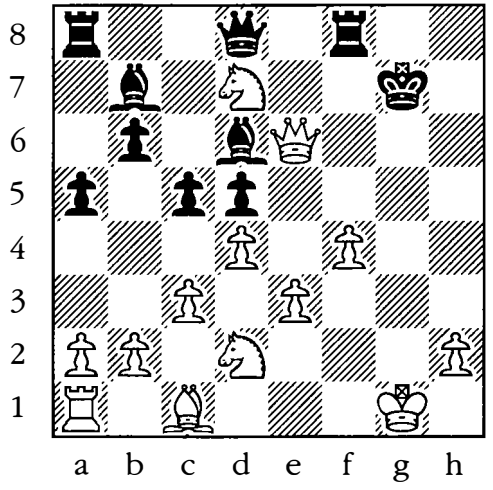
19...fxg6 20 ♕xg6+ ♔h8 21 ♕xh5+ ♔g7 22 ♕g6+ ♔h8 23 ♕h6+



Position after 23 ♕h6+

White picks off as many pawns around Black's king as possible before cashing out his attack for Black's d7-knight.

23...♔g8 24 ♕xe6+ ♔g7 25 ♘xd7



Position after 25 ♘xd7

White has emerged from the complications with a winning material advantage – a knight and three pawns for a rook. White's king is also very safe while Black's king will experience problems for some time to come.

If Black plays 25...♗c8, White can simply respond 26 ♘xf8 ♗xe6 27 ♘xe6+ – winning back the queen.

Basic Principles in the Stonewall Attack

1) Control the Centre

Quickly establish a bind on the dark squares with d4, e3 and f4 – creating an excellent outpost on e5.

2) Develop Your Pieces Actively

Compensate for the natural light-square weakness by deploying your pieces accurately – ♗d3, ♘d2, ♘f3, ♘e5, etc.

3) Get Your King Safe!

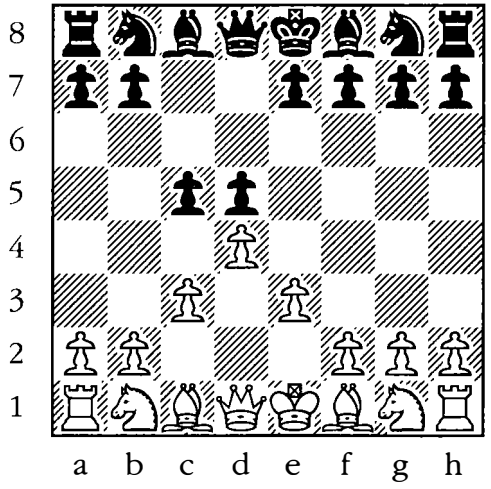
Castling is not a defensive move; it is a necessary step to guard your king before starting the attack.

When to NOT Play the Stonewall

Now let's take a look at a few set-ups for Black that could cause problems for White in the traditional Stonewall set-up.

First, we will look at a very aggressive move order for Black with a rapid ...d5, ...c5, and ...♘c6 – tending to result in a Reversed Queen Gambit type position. I recommend that White does not stubbornly continue with the typical Stonewall plan against this set-up with pawns on d4, e3, and f4, but rather adapts the plan towards grabbing Black's loose c5-pawn and trying to hold on to it. While, positionally, it may not look terribly attractive, that extra pawn can drive a wedge into Black's position, and it is usually pretty difficult for Black to recover. This plan definitely requires a flexible mindset; however, if you want to play the Stonewall as a base for your opening strategy – you have to understand that the traditional Stonewall Attack is not always the best solution to your opponent's response. So, let's take a look at an example of how to snatch Black's loose c5-pawn and consolidate White's position with low risk.

1 d4 d5 2 e3 c5 3 c3

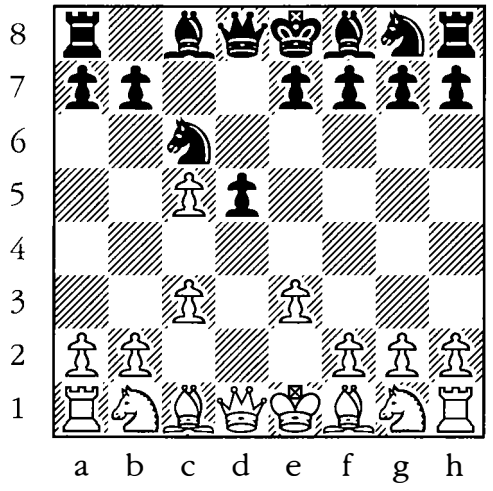


Position after 3 c3

White plays 3 c3 to aim for similar positions in the Queen's Gambit Accepted with an extra tempo. It is too early to steer for forcing lines but on general grounds if Black allows you to grab the pawn on c5, I would highly recommend taking it because the burden of proof then shifts to Black. He will have to prove that he can either smoothly recapture the pawn, or receive equal-to-superior posi-

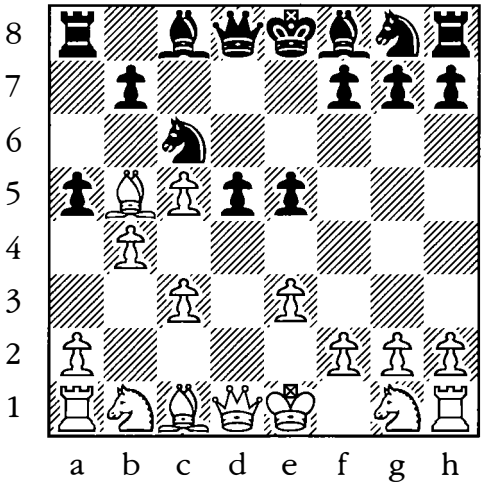
tional compensation. Black has a variety of different responses and plans and White must be flexible and attentive. In this example, we will look at how White should grab the pawn if possible and rapidly coordinate to prevent Black from capitalizing on a temporary lead in development.

3...♘c6 4 dxc5



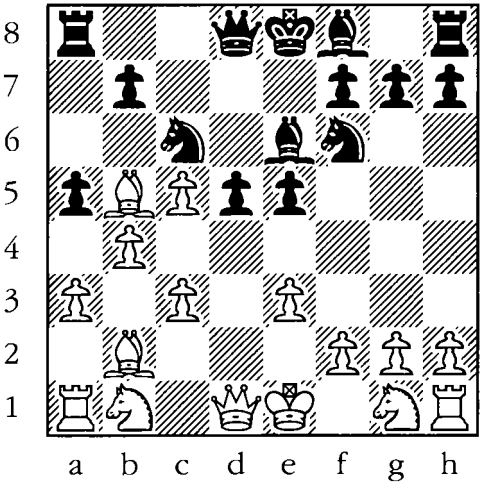
Position after 4 dxc5

White snatches the pawn and Black must play very accurately to get it back. If **4...e5 5 b4 a5** then White should play **6 ♗b5**, stabilizing his extra pawn by pinning Black's knight on c6.



Position after 6 ♗b5

This concept with 6 ♗b5 is very important in this line because if Black is able to recapture the pawn on c5 without much effort, White's position will not be very good. Although White's light-squared bishop is his 'good' bishop, because it is working with White's pawns on dark squares, White should be prepared to exchange it for Black's c6-knight if necessary to maintain the extra pawn. Play could continue: **6...♘f6 7 ♗b2 ♗e6 8 a3**

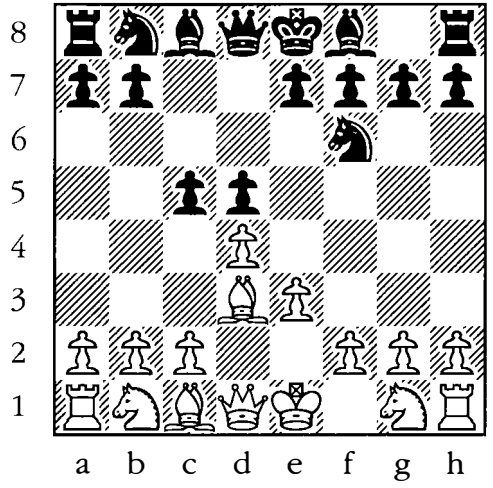


Position after 8 a3

White should rush to defend his weak pawn chain on the queenside with moves like ♗b2 and a3 and only then proceed with normal developing moves like ♘f3, ♘bd2, 0-0, etc.

Now let's examine another example that follows the same general idea for White: respond to an early ...c5 by trying to snatch the pawn and hang on for dear life by following up a quick dxc5 with b2-b4.

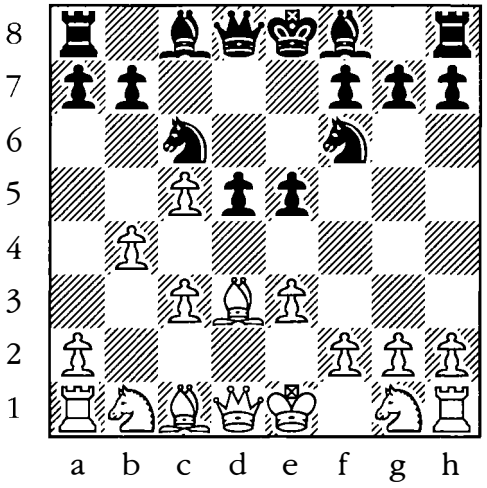
1 d4 d5 2 e3 ♘f6 3 ♗d3 c5



Position after 3...c5

This is slightly different than the previous example in that Black has played 2...♘f6 and White has played 3 ♗d3 before 3...c5. This should help Black because for White to keep his extra pawn on c5, he will probably need to move his light-squared bishop again to b5 (pinning Black's c6-knight and helping White protect his b4-pawn). Let's take a look at a few practical continuations.

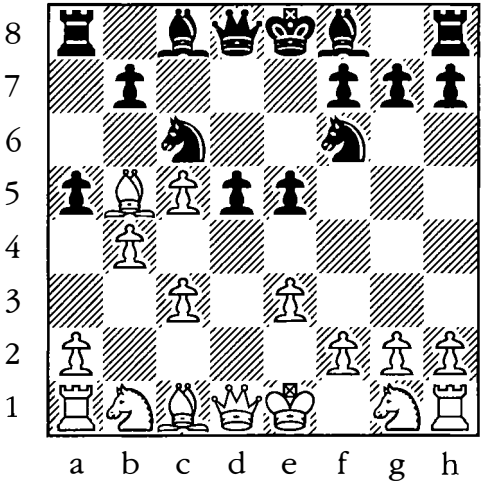
4 c3 ♘c6 5 dxc5 e5 6 b4



Position after 6 b4

White can still maintain the pawn on c5, but it's going to be trickier with the move order employed by Black in this example.

6...a5 7 ♗b5

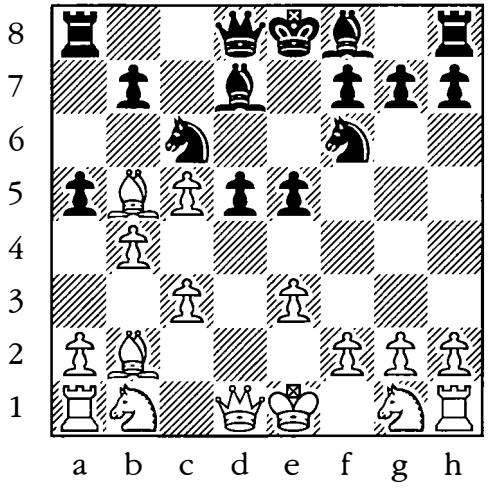


Position after 7 ♗b5

It is necessary to move the light-squared bishop again with 7 ♗b5 as 7 a3

would allow Black to win at least one pawn back with 7...axb4 8 cxb4 ♘xb4! – exploiting the pin on the a-file.

7...♗d7 8 ♗b2



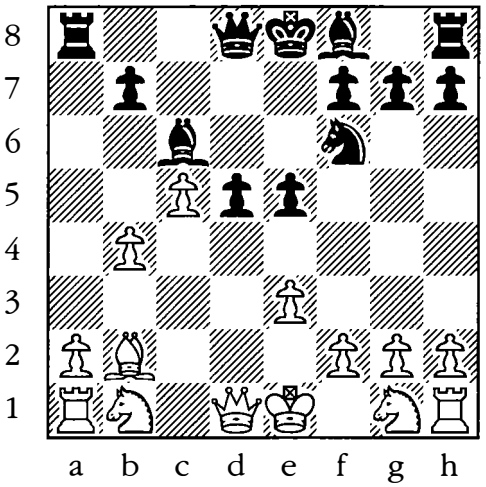
Position after 8 ♗b2

White develops, protects his rook on a1, and creates indirect pressure against Black's e5-pawn. If Black tries to immediately undermine the c5-pawn with 8...b6, White maintains the balance by counter-attacking Black's e5-pawn with 9 ♘f3. If Black continues with 9...e4 then White can play 10 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 11 ♘d4 with a strong position.

8 ♕b3 looks active as well, but Black achieves strong pressure after 8...axb4 9 cxb4 b6 – a common undermining manoeuvre in this type of position.

Also after the natural 8 a3 Black obtains an excellent position and regains material with 8...axb4 9 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 10 cxb4 b6. White's c5-pawn is stuck because if 11 cxb6 then Black has a familiar tactic based on the pin on the a-file with 11...♗xb4+.

8...axb4 9 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 10 cxb4



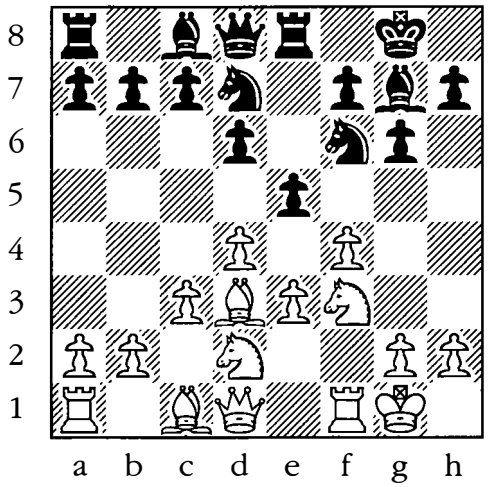
Position after 10 cxb4

White is close to consolidating his extra pawn but he should still be careful. Active play against Black's e5-pawn will tie down Black's pieces, and if Black pushes ...e5-e4 he will give up an incredible square for White's knights. Black's main compensation for the pawn is his light-squared bishop, and it is a very common manoeuvre for Black to play ...♗b5 to place the bishop on a more active diagonal. In order to block this diagonal and castle kingside, White can develop his kingside knight to e2 instead of f3.

This Reversed Queen's Gambit set-up is very aggressive and allows Black chances of seizing the initiative in the opening. White is required to play very energetically to hold on to the extra pawn without giving up too many positional concessions. If this sort of 'risky' opening choice does not suit your style, you can also employ the Zukertort System with a queenside fianchetto against many 'Anti-Stonewall' openings.

Adapt to the King's Indian Defence with the Zukertort Set-Up

Let's review the King's Indian Defence and how White should adapt to this scheme for the Black pieces. It is simply unreasonable to play the Stonewall against the King's Indian, as Black will inevitably achieve the e5 break and a very comfortable position in the centre.



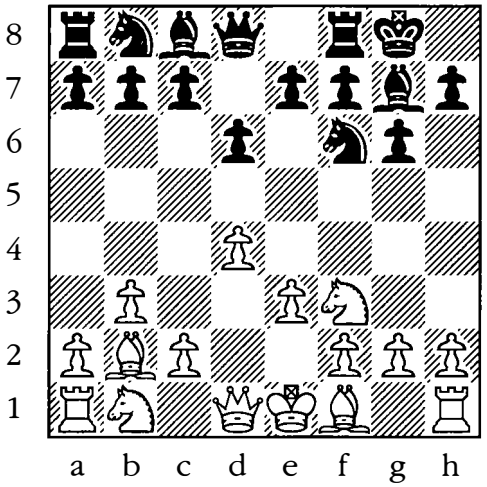
Sample Position – Stonewall vs. King's Indian

In the sample diagram, Black has obtained an excellent position in the centre and White will have to be very careful not to concede more space to Black's solid structure.

The kingside fianchetto in this opening is extremely difficult to attack head-on – thus White needs to change plans with an open-mindset against the King's Indian Defence.

My recommendation is to play the Blackburne-Zukertort Opening, involving a similar pawn structure with the inclusion of a queenside fianchetto to combat the long a1-h8 diagonal. Again, the Stonewall is not a come-one, come-all solution. Flexibility and adaptability are absolute essentials to play this opening scheme. The following example will provide a basic model for White's play against the King's Indian Defence.

1 d4 ♘f6 2 e3 g6 3 ♘f3 ♗g7 4 b3 d6 5 ♗b2 0-0

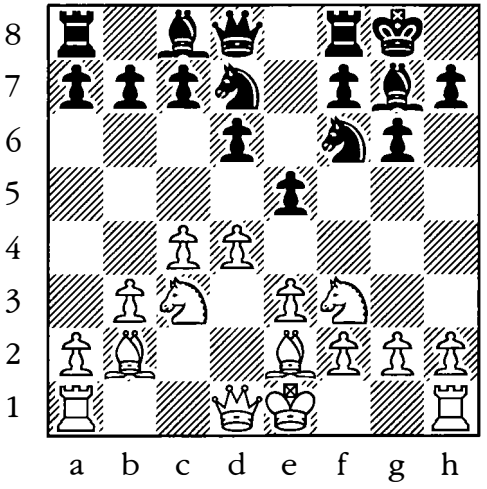


Position after 5...0-0

White instantly sets up opposition on the a1-h8 diagonal against Black's g7-bishop.

It is important to set up the queenside fianchetto early on, before Black is able to break open the a1-h8 diagonal with moves like ...c5 and ...e5.

6 ♗e2 ♘bd7 7 c4 e5 8 ♘c3



Position after 8 ♘c3

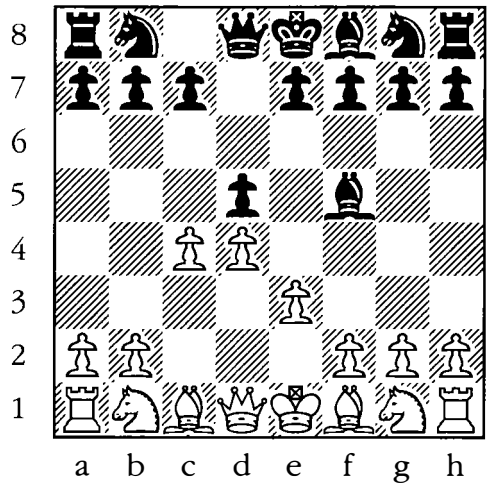
In many other lines, White can simply develop his queenside knight to d2; however, against this early 7...e5 line by Black – White needs to keep the d2-square open as a retreat square for his f3-knight against a potential ...e4. White's position is very solid here and he has nothing to worry about. If Black exchanges in the centre with 8...exd4, then White can simply reply 9 ♘xd4 – keeping the a1-h8 diagonal open for his dark-squared bishop on b2.

Managing Other Sidelines

Let's review a few side variations by Black and the best common plans for White. We will see that certain sidelines require a new game plan. I cannot stress more the importance of understanding the opening over trying to memorize moves. It is much better to focus yourself on the general ideas and concepts of an opening, as your opponent will rarely help you out by following the analysis you remember.

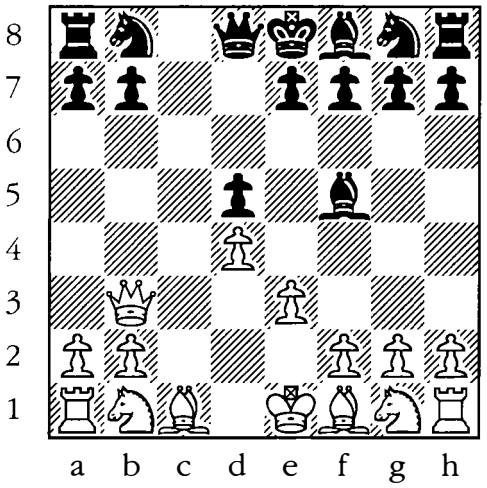
Beating an Early ...♗f5

1 d4 d5 2 e3 ♗f5 3 c4



Position after 3 c4

White changes gears and places immediate pressure on Black's d5-pawn. Also, White can now develop his queen to b3 where it will attack both d5 and b7.
3...c6 4 cxd5 cxd5 5 ♕b3



Position after 5 ♕b3

5...♕c7

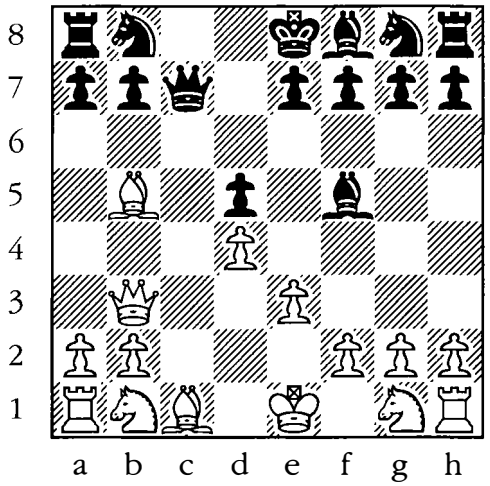
The best move for Black is 5...♕c7, defending the b7- pawn and attacking White's bishop on c1.

If 5...b6, Black will have a serious problem on the a4-e8 diagonal and a specific weakness on the c6-square. White can exploit this with moves like ♘f3-♘e5 and ♗b5.

5...♕c8 is also playable, but the queen blocks up Black's position as a rook will be better placed on c8.

We are now following the game **Nikolic-Pijpers** (Leiden 2011):

6 ♗b5+

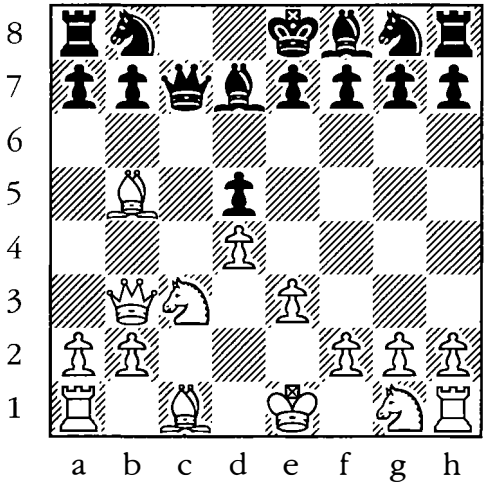


Position after 6 ♗b5+

White's 6 ♗b5+ is the most accurate continuation, forcing Black to play 6...♘d7 (which we will examine in the next example) or bring his bishop back with 6...♗d7.

If Black responds with 6...♘c6, White can simply snatch the d5-pawn with 7 ♕xd5 as Black's knight will be blocking his queen from attacking White's c1-bishop.

6...♗d7 7 ♘c3

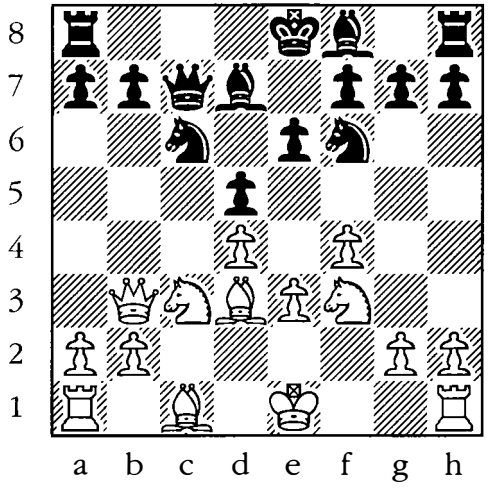


Position after 7 ♘c3

7...e6

After 7...♗xb5 Black would lose a pawn to 8 ♕xb5+ ♕c6 9 ♕xd5.

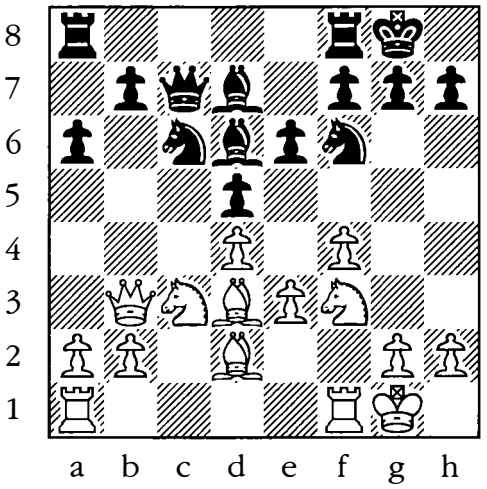
8 ♗d3 ♘c6 9 f4 ♘f6 10 ♘f3



Position after 10 ♘f3

White has obtained a position very similar to the normal lines of the Stonewall Attack. In fact White's position is even better than in many main lines as Black's bishop is stuck inside of his pawn chain on d7. While Black can try to achieve counterplay on the queenside, White should try to focus on maintaining control of the centre and shifting his pieces toward Black's king for an attack.

10...a6 11 0-0 ♗d6 12 ♗d2 0-0

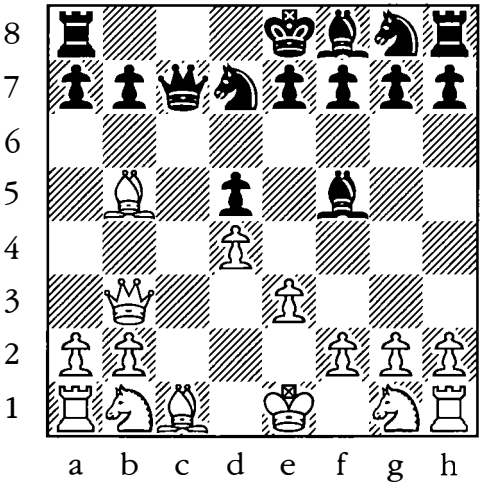


Position after 12...0-0

White has an excellent position and his plan for moving forward is very direct and similar to the main lines of the Stonewall Attack – typically involving ♘e5, ♖f3, and ♖h3. White can also rapidly transfer his queen over to the kingside via ♕b3-♕d1 – ready to jump into action on f3, g4, or h5.

Now let's look at the other main line, involving 6...♘d7:

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 e3 ♗f5 4 cxd5 cxd5 5 ♕b3 ♕c7 6 ♗b5+ ♘d7



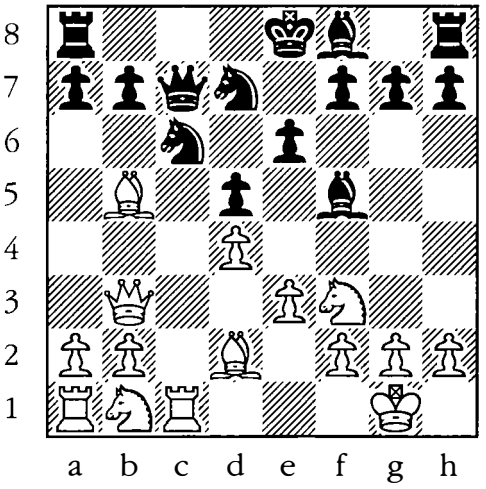
Position after 6...♘d7

This variation may look innocent but it can be tricky for White if he is not familiar with a good scheme for rapid development. Black's usual plan is to play ...e6, ...♘e7, ...♘c6 to block the c-file and transfer his pieces to the queenside, followed by ...♗e7 and ...0-0.

White should play to rapidly transfer his pieces towards the queenside, especially his kingside rook to c1 where it will exert strong pressure on the only open file.

We are now following the game **Khenkin-Hector** (Malmo 2006):

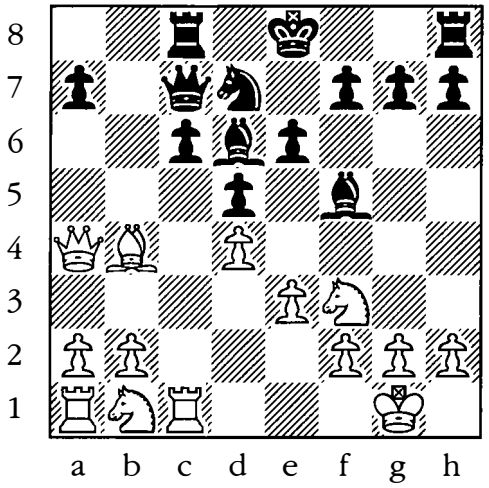
7 ♗d2 e6 8 ♘f3 ♘e7 9 0-0 ♘c6 10 ♖c1



Position after 10 ♖c1

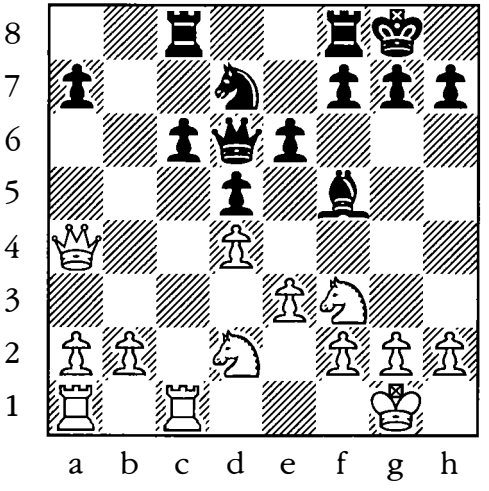
White's position is very easy to play due to his active development and it is Black who must be careful in this line. The main idea for White in this type of position is to exchange with ♗xc6 bxc6 – leaving Black with a backward pawn on c6 that is subject to long-term pressure on the half-open c-file. If White can maintain this pressure on the c6-pawn and prevent Black from liberating his position with ...c5, White will be in good shape.

10...♖c8 11 ♕a4 ♗d6 12 ♗xc6 bxc6 13 ♗b4



Position after 13 ♗b4

White has achieved a very promising position from the opening with good prospects of long-term pressure on the queenside due to a more solid pawn structure. 13 ♗b4 is an excellent manoeuvre, exchanging off White's 'bad bishop' for Black's 'good bishop' – Black should refrain from capturing 13...♗xb4 as 14 ♕xb4 takes over the a3-f8 diagonal and makes it very difficult for Black to castle.
13...0-0 14 ♗xd6 ♕xd6 15 ♘bd2

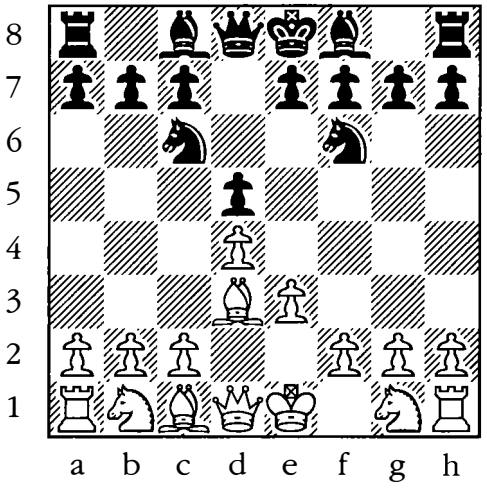


Position after 15 ♘bd2

White has significant pressure on the queenside and if Black tries to break the position open with 15...c5 then White will be able to snatch the a7-pawn. If Black continues with other ideas like playing for ...e5, White should aim to create a blockade on the c5-square with moves like ♘b3, ♖c3, and ♖ac1. Attacking Black's weak a7-pawn and building pressure on the c-file should guarantee White excellent chances in the middlegame.

What If Black Chases Your Bishop on d3?

1 d4 d5 2 e3 ♘f6 3 ♗d3 ♘c6

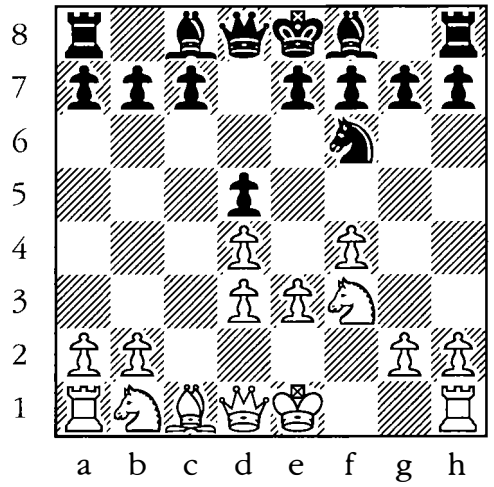


Position after 3...♘c6

Black is immediately threatening to gain space in the centre with ...e5, so White must prevent this with 4 f4.

Black's set-up looks very active with his knights; however, he would actually be able to get better counterplay in the future if he could use his c-pawn to pressure White's centre.

4 f4 ♘b4 5 ♘f3 ♘xd3 6 cxd3



Position after 6 cxd3

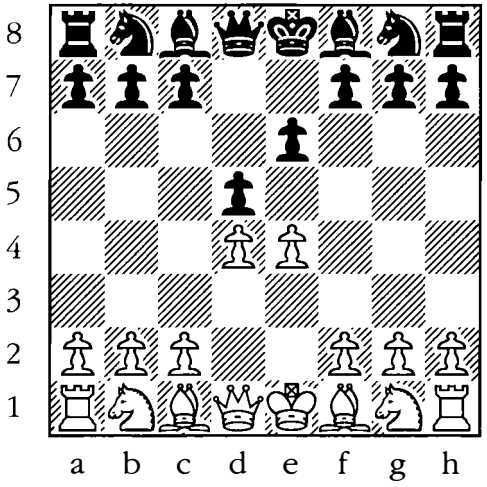
Instead of retreating with 5 ♗e2, White actively developed with 5 ♘f3 and built a nice central pawn mass with 6 cxd3. The pawn on d3 also covers the important central squares c4 and e4.

White's position is now very easy to play as he possesses the half-open c-file as well as possibilities of taking over the centre with a future e4 push.

White could continue with direct moves like 0-0, ♗d2, ♘c3, ♘e5, ♖c1, etc. or attacking quickly with ♘e5 and lifting the rook via f1-f3-h3 to go after Black's king. White can also utilize a queenside fianchetto with b3 and ♗b2 as in the Zukertort System.

Introduction to the French Defence

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5

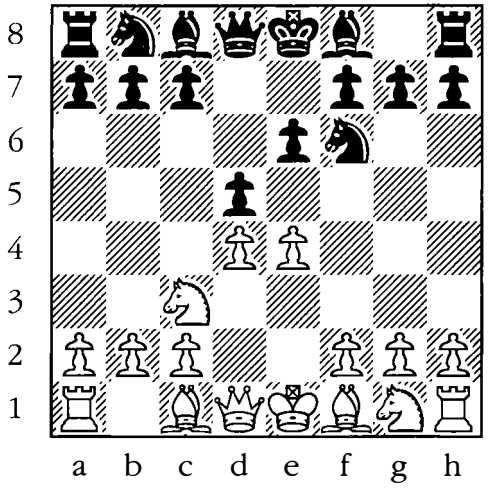


Starting Position of French Defence

The French Defence is similar in ideology to the Stonewall Attack in that Black will typically fix the pawn structure in the centre. Black will place his pawns on the light squares e6 and d5, aiming to play with his pieces on the dark squares against White's centre. Although Black does concede space to White, if he plays actively enough he will receive more than sufficient compensation in the form of energetic counterplay against White's big pawn centre. The French Defence is a very solid response to 1 e4.

The French Defence with 3 ♘c3

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6



Position after 3...♘f6

The main options for Black against 3 ♘c3 are 3...♘f6 or 3...♗b4.

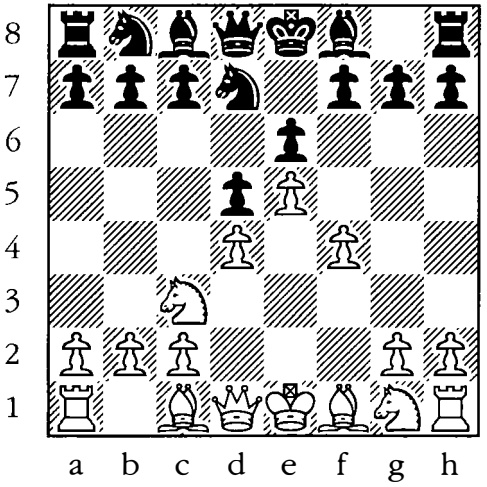
I recommend starting out with 3...♘f6 because the concepts in this line overlap more with the other main variations in the French Defence.

With 3...♘f6, Black directly attacks White's e4 pawn – often inviting White to gain space by pushing the e-pawn.

Let's examine the main lines after 3...♘f6:

French Defence – Steinitz Variation

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 e5 ♘fd7 5 f4

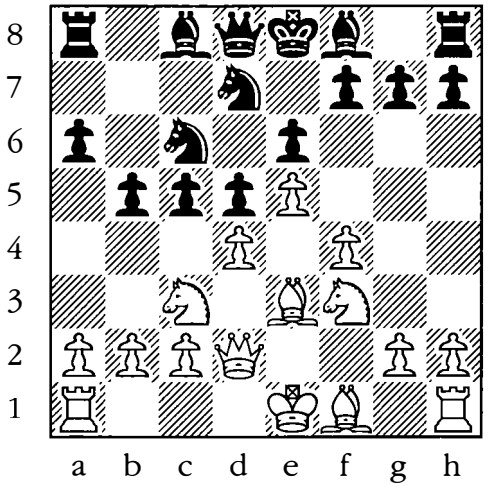


Position after 5 f4

This is one of the most aggressive lines that White can employ against the French Defence. Although Black's position is slightly cramped, it is very tenacious and well-coordinated. Black's basic concept is to maintain a strong centre with his pawns on e6 and d5, and to pressure White's centre pawns on d4 and e5.

5...c5 6 ♘f3 ♘c6 7 ♗e3 a6 8 ♕d2 b5

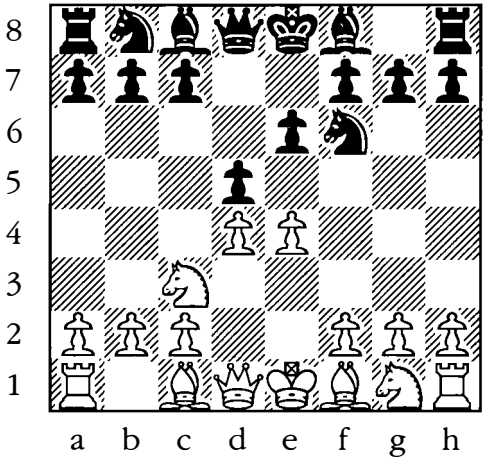
Although there are other options, involving an early ...♕b6 to put pressure on White's d4- and b2-pawns, I recommend that you 'Keep It Simple' and play for early queenside expansion with 7...a6 and 8...b5!?. Depending on White's response, Black can continue with natural developing moves like ...♗b7, ...♗e7, and ...0-0, typically planning to increase the tension against White's centre with a later ...f6. Black is also maintaining excellent tension against White's position with constant threats of ...cxd4 and ...b4. My advice for the less experienced player –'Keep It Simple' by finishing your development and castling to get your king safe before trying to open the position with the thematic break ...f6.



Position after 8...b5

Sidelines after 3 ♘c3 ♘f6

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6



Position after 3...♘f6

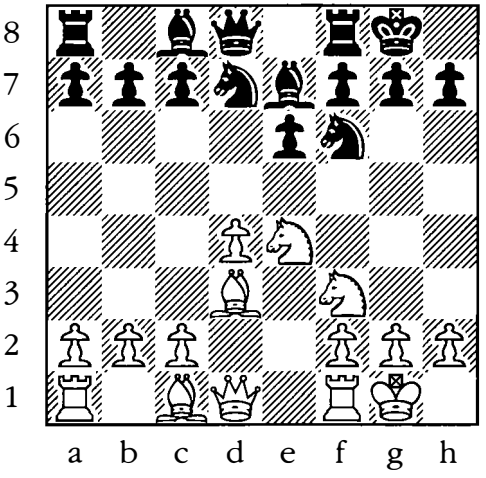
Let's examine some sidelines where White doesn't push the pawn with 4 e5. The principal deviations for White are **4 ♗d3** (the Swiss Variation) and **4 ♗g5** (leading

to the Burn Variation). I recommend that Black again follows the simplest and most solid continuations, revolving around a quick exchange ...dxe4 to avoid complicated lines. A quick ...dxe4 alleviates the central pressure and rapidly allows Black a comfortable equality.

Let's take a look at the basic ideas revolving around Black's response with 4...dxe4. I recommend to follow up with simple developing moves such as ...♗e7, ...0-0, ...♘bd7, and then a quick ...c5 to undermine White's centre, or a quieter, more positional plan involving ...b6 and ...♗b7.

Here's a sample line:

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♗d3 dxe4 5 ♘xe4 ♘bd7 6 ♘f3 ♗e7 7 0-0 0-0



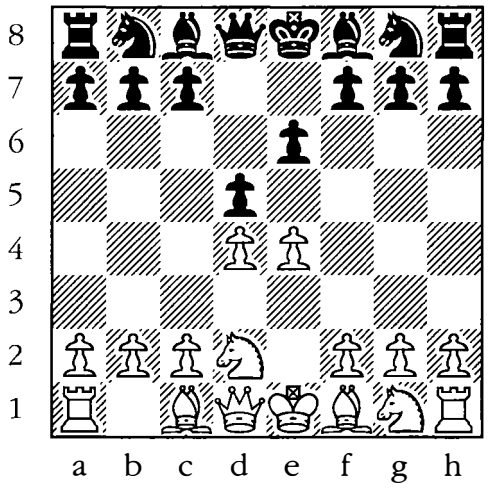
Position after 7...0-0

Black's position is perfectly playable as he has multiple sources of counterplay. He can continue quietly with moves like ...b6 and ...♗b7, or he can take an instant shot at White's centre with ...c5. Both plans promise good chances.

French Defence – Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2

Let's review the main lines of Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2. I recommend Black to follow a similar plan as against the 3 ♘c3, where White obtains a slight space advantage with his central pawns on the dark squares (d4, e5, etc.) and Black rapidly counterattacks with moves like ...c5, ...♘c6, ...♕b6, and ...f6.

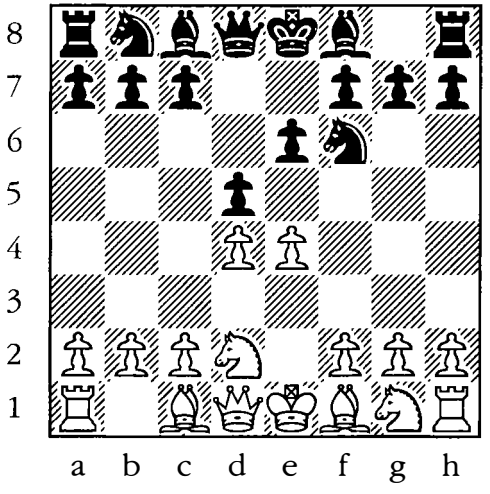
It is imperative to play very actively with the Black pieces in the French Defence, and to strike at White's centre before he can transform his space advantage into a dangerous attack.



Tarrasch Variation with 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2

Now let's look at a nice example for Black on how to achieve an active position against the Tarrasch Variation.

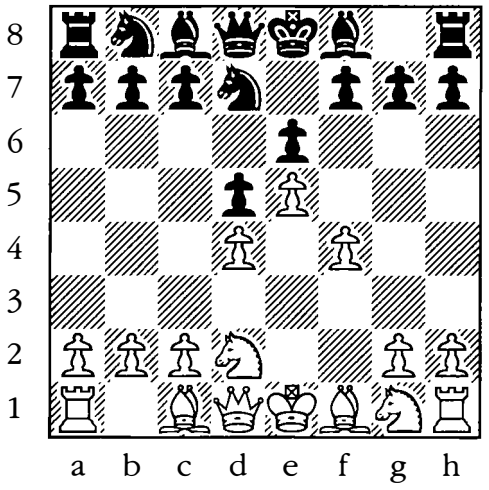
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♘f6



Position after 3...♘f6

Black again tries to provoke White to gain space with 4 e5, guaranteeing Black counterplay against White's extended pawn centre.

4 e5 ♘fd7 5 f4

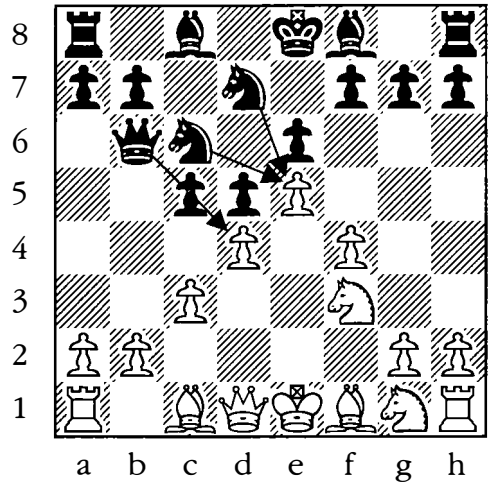


Position after 5 f4

White plays to strengthen his pawn centre. Black should continue with moves like ...c5, ...♘c6, ...♕b6, ...♗e7, and ...0-0. I want to emphasize that a main difference for Black against the Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2 is that you don't need to play ...a6 and ...b5 as I recommended against the Steinitz Variation with 3 ♘c3. That plan of rapid queenside expansion is more effective against the Steinitz Variation because Black can gain momentum attacking White's knight. However, against the Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2, it won't be as effective to march the queenside pawns because there is not such a target to help you gain time attacking.

In this example, Black will strive to immediately pressure White's centre.

5...c5 6 c3 ♘c6 7 ♘df3 ♕b6

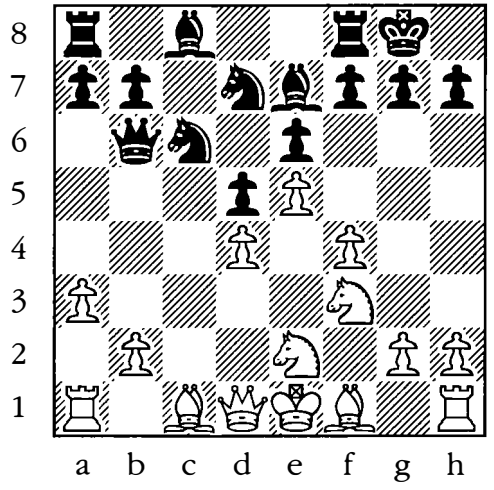


Position after 7...♕b6 – Lines of Pressure

This diagram is a perfect illustration of Black's counterplay in the French Defence. We can see that although Black's position is slightly cramped, White's massive pawn centre can be viewed as a liability.

The main debate in the French Defence is whether White's pawn centre is strong or weak, and Black will certainly be trying to break it down.

8 ♘e2 cxd4 9 cxd4 ♗e7 10 a3 0-0

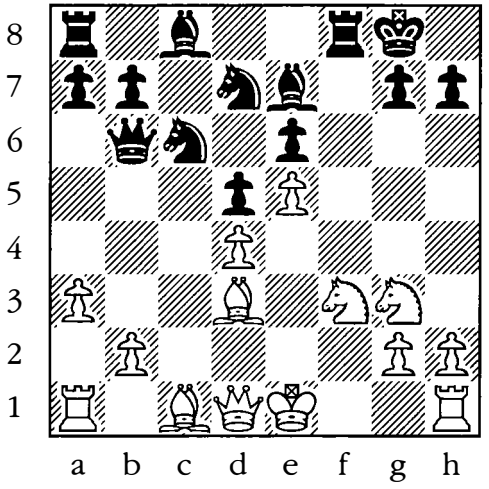


Position after 10...0-0

White has employed a cumbersome set-up with his knights on e2 and f3, trying to protect his centre at all costs.

Black has developed actively, and now that his king is protected and out of the centre, he is ready to open the position with ...f6 to try to take advantage of White's lack of development.

11 ♘g3 f6 12 ♗d3 fxe5 13 fxe5



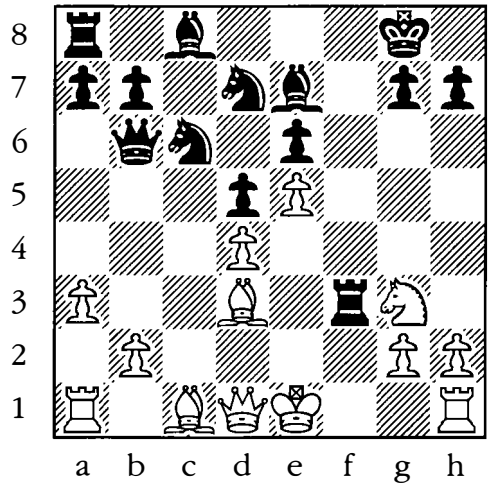
Position after 13 fxe5

This position should illustrate the dangers White faces if he does not play accurately against the French Defence. Black is now threatening two common sacrifices to break open the position: 13...♖xf3 and 13...♘dxe5.

1) 13...♖xf3

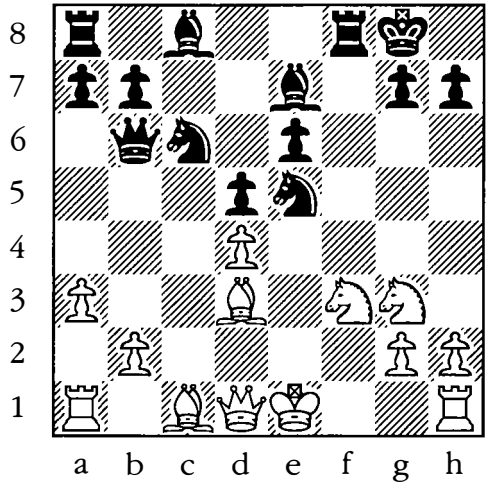
Black sacrifices his rook and receives excellent compensation. He is going to win the d4-pawn immediately, and later the e5-pawn as well. This combination is more effective in the above position because White's king is still in the centre, although the idea can also work very well even if White has already castled.

More than any specific move order, the concept should be emphasized and remembered: *Black should create a coordinated attack as quickly as possible against White's extended pawn centre.*



Position after 13...♖xf3

2) 13...♘dxe5



Position after 13...♘dxe5

While this type of sacrifice/tactic is not nearly as common as the exchange sacrifice 13...♖xf3 we just looked at, it is still an important concept in many lines of the French Defence. After 14 dxe5 ♘xe5 Black receives two pawns for the piece and a very dangerous attack against White's king. *This type of tactic is much more*

effective when White has not yet castled and his king is still in the centre.

Another sacrifice to remember is 13...♘xd4 14 ♘xd4, and now not 14...♕xd4?? 15 ♗xh7+ with a decisive discovered attack on the queen, but instead 14...♘xe5! reaching a very similar position to the 13...♘dxe5 sacrifice.

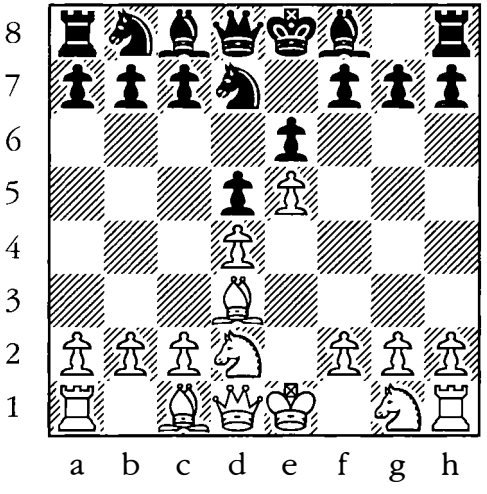
The Tarrasch: Closed Variation

Now let's take a look at another main line in the French Defence, Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2. In this next example we will see White adopt a more flexible system with quicker development. White is not so adamant about maintaining the pawn wedge on e5 – so Black should take advantage of this and break the centre with a timely ...f6.

White: Khosro Harandi
Black: Wolfgang Uhlmann
Manila Interzonal 1976
French Defence

GM Wolfgang Uhlmann was a legendary specialist in the French Defence in the latter part of the 20th century, making huge contributions to the development of its theory. In this game excerpt, we will see how Uhlmann develops his pieces actively and immediately begins creating threats against White's extended pawn centre.

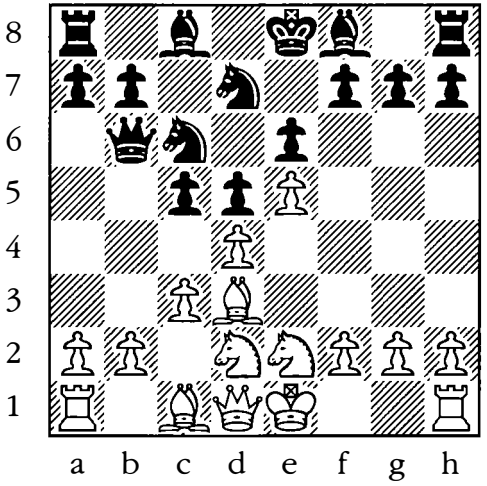
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♘f6 4 e5 ♘fd7 5 ♗d3



Position after 5 ♗d3

Instead of 5 f4 from the previous example, White plays more energetically and aims for rapid development. The drawback of this plan for White is that his e5-pawn will not be as well defended.

5...c5 6 c3 ♘c6 7 ♘e2 ♕b6

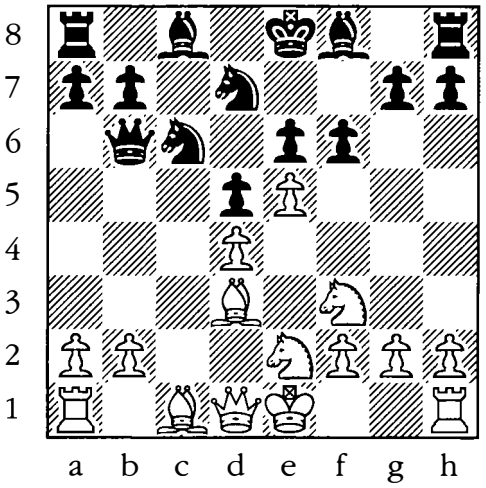


Position after 7...♕b6

Black establishes the familiar pressure against White's centre with the pawn on c5, the knights on c6 and d7, and the queen on b6.

It is important to introduce this pressure as quickly as possible so as not to allow White time to play f4 to reinforce the centre. Now White is forced to defend the d4 pawn.

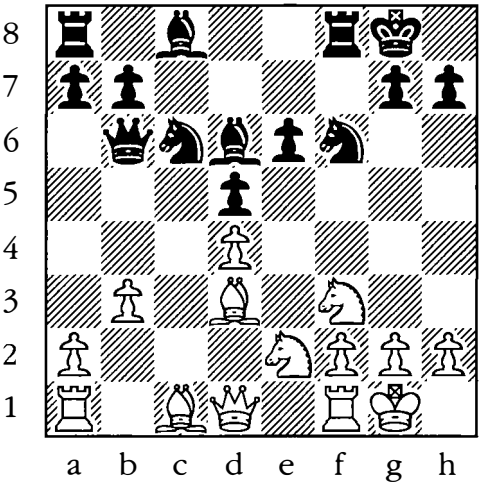
8 ♘f3 cxd4 9 cxd4 f6



Position after 9...f6

Although Black's king is still in the centre, it is okay to play ...f6 because White does not have any ways to rapidly open the position and attack Black's king. This is simply a sharper way of playing the French Defence, essentially forcing White to play exf6 and grant Black strong activity.

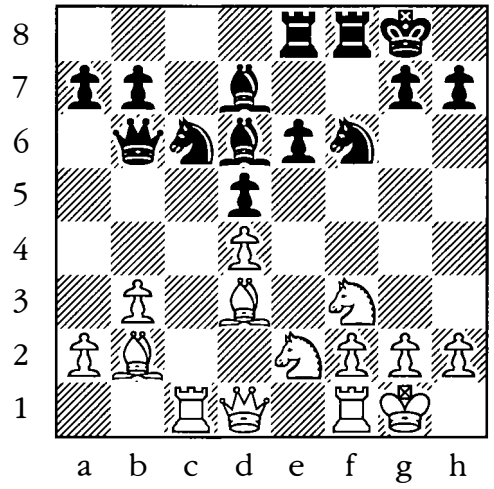
10 exf6 ♘xf6 11 0-0 ♗d6 12 b3 0-0



Position after 12...0-0

The concepts in this position are typical to many lines in the French Defence. Black has a backward e6-pawn which could be a very serious long-term weakness; however, in compensation he has excellent activity, pressure against White's d4-pawn and a half-open e-file to work with.

13 ♗b2 ♗d7 14 ♖c1 ♖ae8



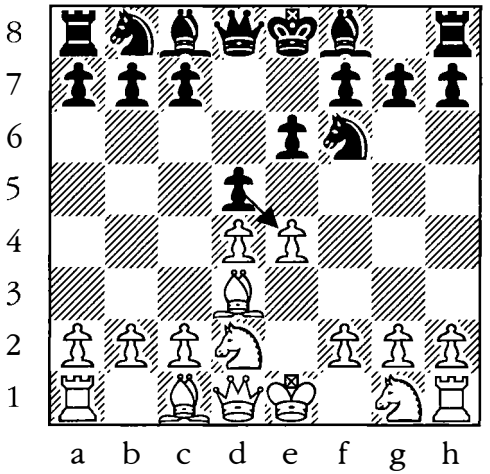
Position after 14...♖ae8

Black has successfully completed his development and is ready to put together a long-term strategic plan. Often Black will like to manoeuvre his light-squared bishop on d7 to a more active diagonal via ...♗e8-g6 or ...♗e8-h5. In this specific position, this plan will obviously take some time to put into effect.

It is also common for Black to double his rooks on the f-file to create pressure, and it is even possible to sacrifice an exchange with ...♖xf3 in the future to weaken White's control of the centre and protection of his d4-pawn.

At any rate, this position is very acceptable for Black and he should not have any trouble moving forward in the middlegame.

What if White Doesn't Push e4-e5?

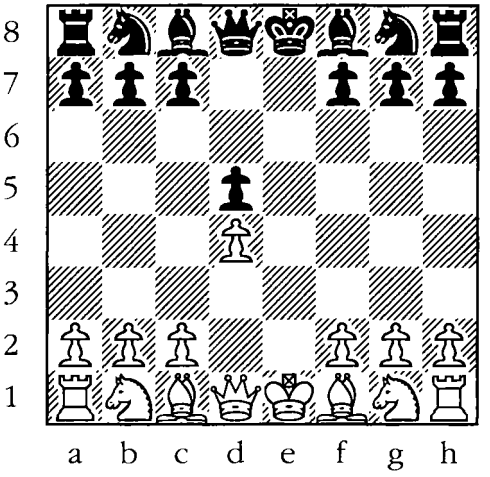


Position after 4 ♗d3

Against 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♘f6 4 ♗d3 I recommend Black to transpose into the Swiss Variation by exchanging 4...dxe4, as covered earlier in the 3 ♘c3 section.

French Defence – Exchange Variation

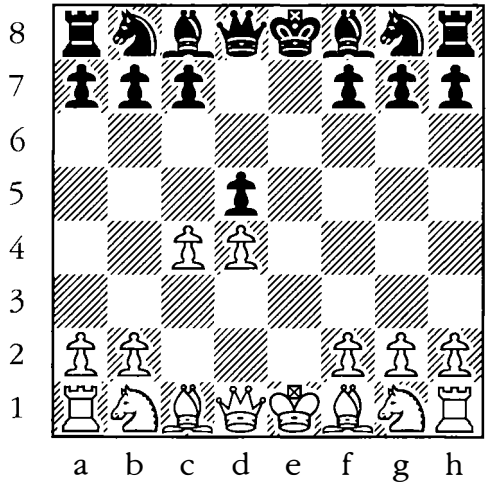
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 exd5 exd5



Position after 3...exd5

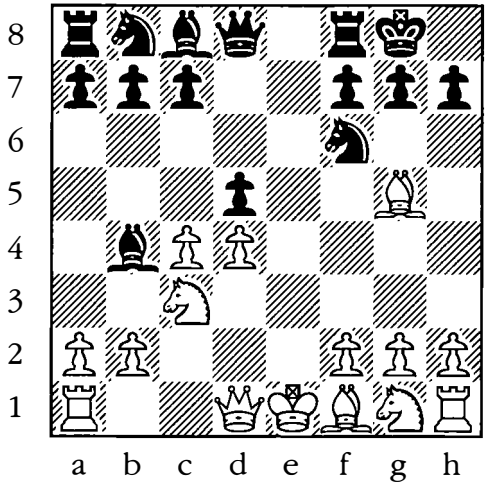
The Exchange Variation in the French Defence is a relatively tame line for White who is usually aiming for a calm equality out of the opening and a prolonged positional struggle.

The most aggressive idea involves 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 exd5 exd5 4 c4.



Position after 4 c4

Black should respond with active development: 4...♘f6 5 ♗g5 ♗b4+ 6 ♘c3 0-0.



Position after 6...0-0

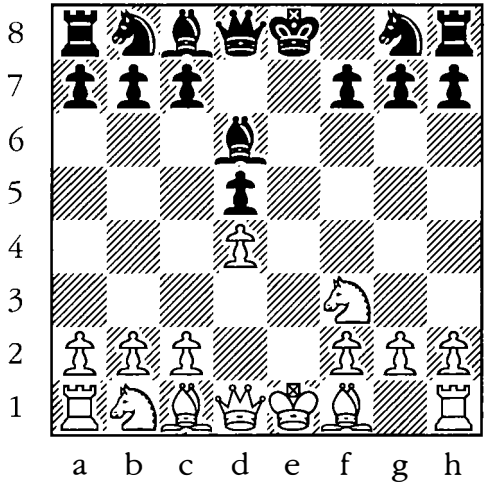
It is important to remember to play the ...♗b4+ as it buys Black time to get his king out of the centre immediately. Also, White will typically respond with ♘c3 – giving Black a free pin against White's king.

After 6...0-0 I much prefer Black's position because it is much more active. If White chooses the Exchange Variation, this is the perfect time for Black to try to develop a piece and create a new threat with every single move.

However, many beginner chess players simply do not feel comfortable trying to fight sharply for an advantage out of the opening with the Black pieces. There are also some calmer continuations that White can employ, and it is important to know and understand a basic set-up that you can use against a variety of different lines.

The Classic Set-Up: Versatile and Effective

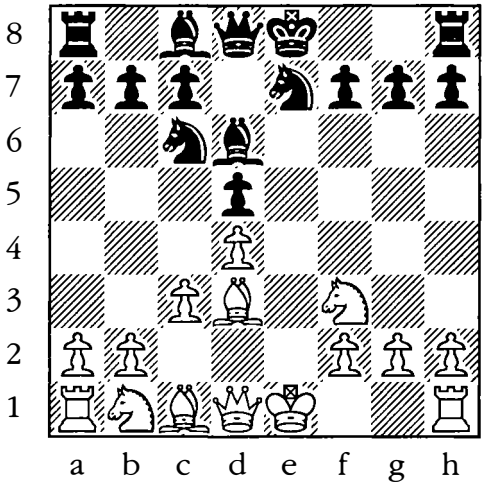
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 exd5 exd5 4 ♘f3 ♗d6



Position after 4...♗d6

Now it wouldn't make any sense to play 4...♗b4+ as White could respond with 5 c3 – essentially giving White a free move to strengthen his centre. Instead, Black should play a quick 4...♗d6 with the idea of preventing White from developing his bishop on c1 to f4. Black should continue by consolidating his position and trying to fight White for control of the e5-square.

5 ♗d3 ♘c6 6 c3 ♘ge7



Position after 7 c3

This is the classic set-up for Black against the Exchange Variation in the French Defence. It is a great basic set-up to remember, as the simplicity of the structure and development allows it to be effective against a variety of continuations in the Exchange Variation. Black's position is extremely compact and flexible, and there are no committal holes or weaknesses.

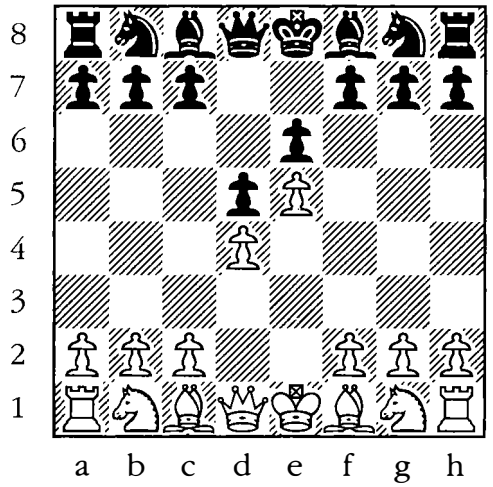
Black places his kingside knight on e7 instead of f6, as now Black doesn't have to worry about White developing the c1-bishop to g5 to pin the knight on f6. Also, from e7 the knight can jump to f5 or g6 and play actively on the kingside.

An important note to remember about this formation is that the light-squared bishop on c8 can become a problem piece, and I would definitely recommend making it a point to trade it off if possible – usually via ...♗g4 to trade it for the knight on f3 or ...♗f5 to trade it for the bishop on d3.

French Defence – Advance Variation with 3 e5

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 e5

The Advance Variation is a dangerous weapon for White against the French Defence; however, Black can defend himself more than adequately if he plays energetically against White's pawn wedge on d4 and e5.



Position after 3 e5

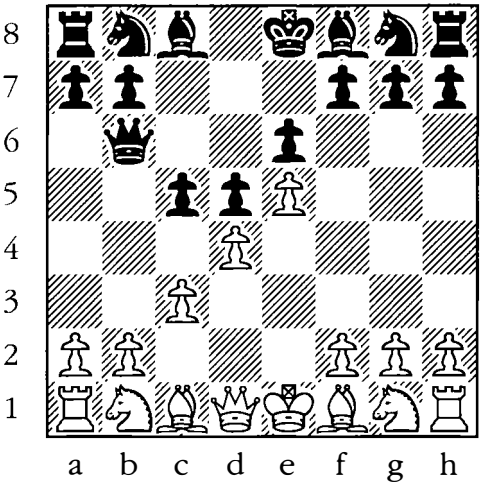
The basic plan for Black is similar to what we have already looked at in the Steinitz and Tarrasch Variations; however, Black needs to be careful of a few sharp traps and gambits that White can employ in the Advance Variation.

To learn an excellent set-up and basic plan on how to play as Black against the Advance Variation, we will examine two games by another legendary player in the history of the French Defence – GM Viktor Korchnoi.

White: Kalle Kiik
Black: Viktor Korchnoi
Harjumaa 2010
French Defence

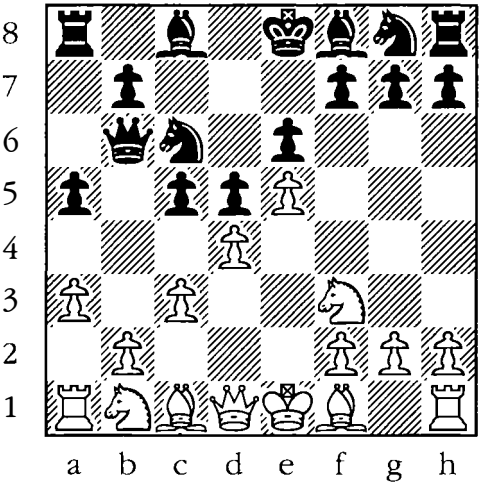
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 e5 c5 4 c3 ♕b6

Black strives for active pressure against White's central d4- and e5-pawns. Black can also play 4...♘c6; however, an early ...♕b6 works well to prevent White from developing his dark-squared bishop on c1.



Position after 4...♕b6

5 ♘f3 ♘c6 6 a3 a5

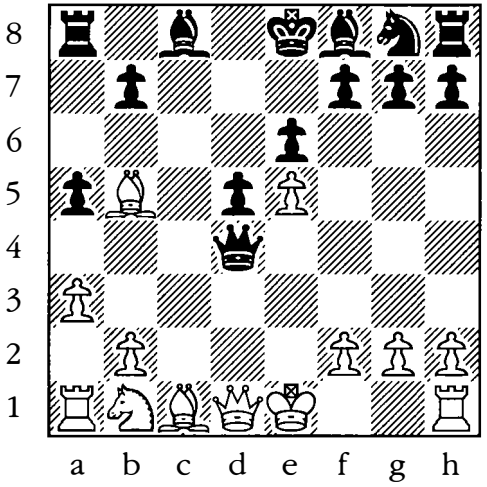


Position after 6...a5

While there are other perfectly acceptable main lines against an early a3 by White, I recommend an instant response with ...a5 to stop White from expanding on the queenside with b4.

7 ♗d3 ♗d7

It was impossible to win White's d4-pawn after 7 ♗d3 with 7...cxd4 8 cxd4 ♘xd4 9 ♘xd4 ♕xd4, as now White plays 10 ♗b5+ and Black will lose his queen.



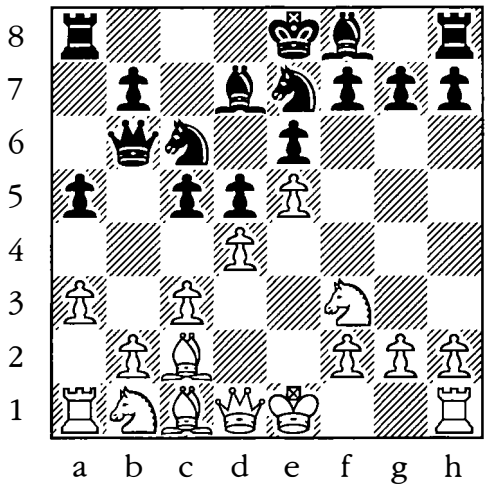
Sample Position after 9 ♗b5+

This type of trick is common in the Advance Variation and Black should be extremely careful before snatching the d4-pawn in any position.

As a general recommendation, beginner players should avoid accepting this type of gambit in the Advance Variation (e.g. the Milner-Barry Gambit) until they have studied it extensively. The lines are extremely sharp and even if you know the basic ideas it is still very easy to go wrong with Black.

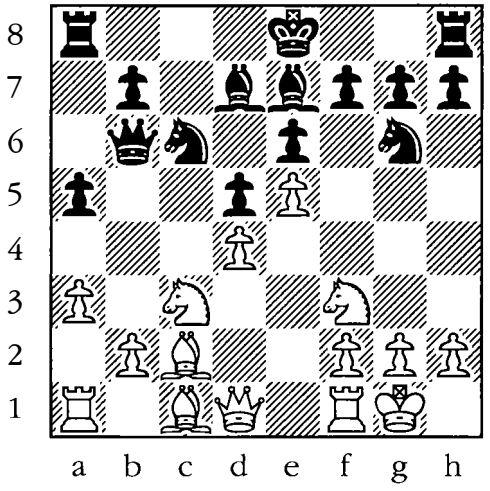
8 ♗c2 ♘ge7

Korchnoi calmly continued his development with 7...♗d7 and 8...♘ge7 – now he can bring the knight to a more active post on f5 or g6, followed by developing his dark-squared bishop on f8 and castling kingside.



Position after 8...♘ge7

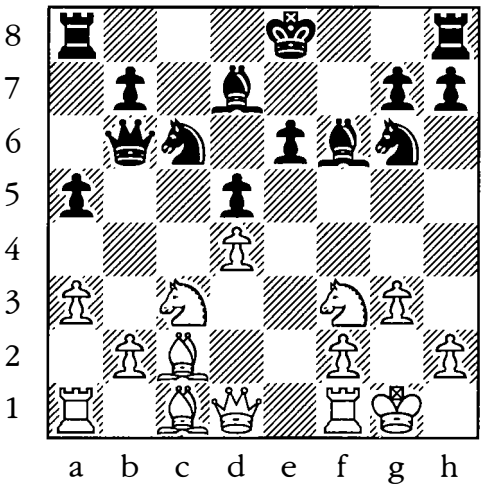
9 0-0 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♘g6 11 ♘c3 ♗e7



Position after 11...♗e7

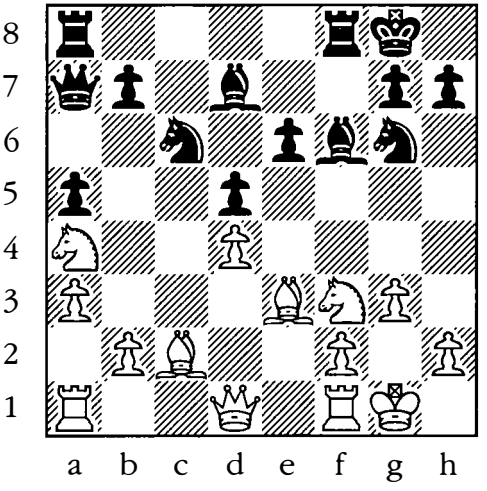
Korchnoi decided to open the c-file with 9...cxd4 and developed his knight to g6 where it supports the undermining of the e5-pawn with a future ...f6.

12 g3 f6 13 exf6 ♗xf6



Position after 13...♗xf6

Black breaks the centre and establishes strong pressure against White's d4-pawn. While Black does have a backward e6-pawn that will remain open to attack from White's rooks on the e-file, Black will maintain a dynamic equality with active piece-play, threats against White's d4-pawn and pressure on the half-open f-file.
14 ♘a4 ♕a7 15 ♗e3 0-0

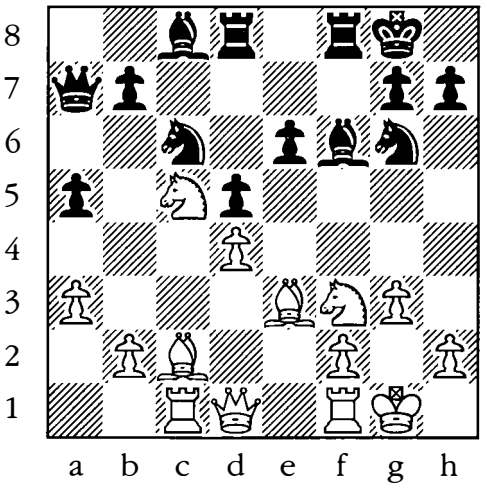


Position after 15...0-0

With 14 ♘a4 White pushed Black's queen back, so he could finish his development with 15 ♗e3. Black chose to maintain maximum pressure on the d4-pawn with 14...♕a7.

Although White has seized a slight initiative, Black's position is extremely durable as it is difficult for White to attack the backward e6-pawn.

16 ♘c5 ♖ad8 17 ♖c1 ♗c8



Position after 17...♗c8

Black preserves his light-squared bishop and maintains a tight and well-coordinated position. Black has a variety of different ideas at his disposal to generate energetic counterplay.

He is now able to push back White's knight with a future ...b6 followed by ...♗a6 – seizing an important diagonal. Or he can double his rooks with ..♖f7 and ...♖df8 to achieve pressure on the f-file.

If White manages to create strong pressure on the c-file, Black can change gears and open the centre with ...e5.

In summary, this game extract demonstrates an active plan for Black against the Advance Variation in the French Defence involving an early ...a5 in response to a3 and rapid development of Black's minor pieces to create pressure against White's extended pawn wedge in the centre.

Other Plans for Black with ...♘h6 and ...♘f5

The plan we looked at in the previous game involving ...♘e7 and ...♘g6 works well

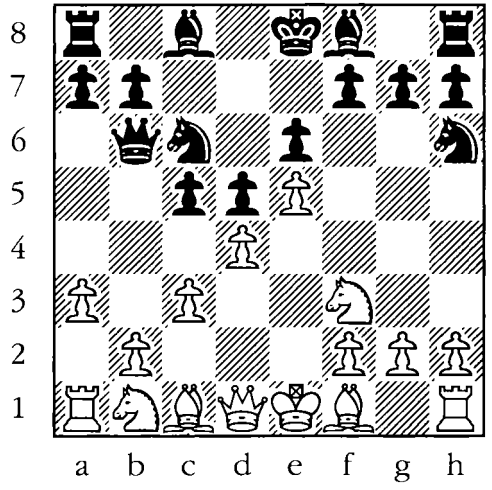
against the Advanced Variation; however, there is a very strong alternative in developing the knight to f5 via h6.

The main difference is that Black will have yet another piece (...♘f5) piling up on White's d4-pawn.

We will now examine another game involving GM Korchnoi:

White: Semen Dvoirys
Black: Viktor Korchnoi
Beersheba 2004
French Defence

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 e5 c5 4 c3 ♕b6 5 ♘f3 ♘c6 7 a3 ♘h6

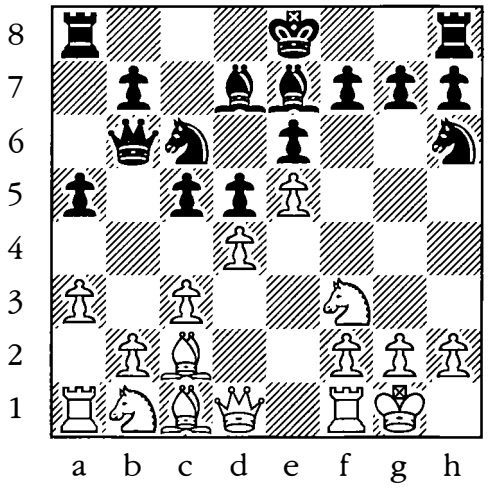


Position after 7...♘h6

While I still recommend the immediate ...a5 in response to a3, to focus our efforts on one type of basic plan, there are other main lines where Black allows White to play b4.

Narrowing your focus while studying openings is very effective as you can prepare one strong variation/plan in each of the main lines instead of preparing a tiny amount in every line.

7 ♗d3 ♗d7 8 ♗c2 a5 9 0-0 ♗e7



Position after 9...♗e7

Black remains unafraid of White doubling his pawns with ♗xh6 as he will receive excellent compensation from the open g-file for his rooks and pressure against White's b2-pawn.

It is instructive that Black has so far declined to relieve the tension in the centre with ...cxd4, as that would facilitate White's development by giving him the c3-square to develop his queenside knight.

10 b3 cxd4 11 cxd4 ♘f5

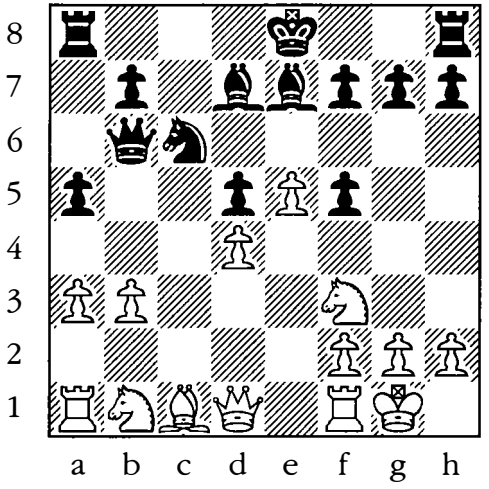
If Black had castled before playing ...♘f5, White could then have played ♗xh6 and greatly weakened the pawn cover around Black's king.

12 ♗xf5 exf5

White gives up his 'good' light-squared bishop to double Black's f-pawns and create an isolated pawn on d5; however, Black easily retains a defensible position.

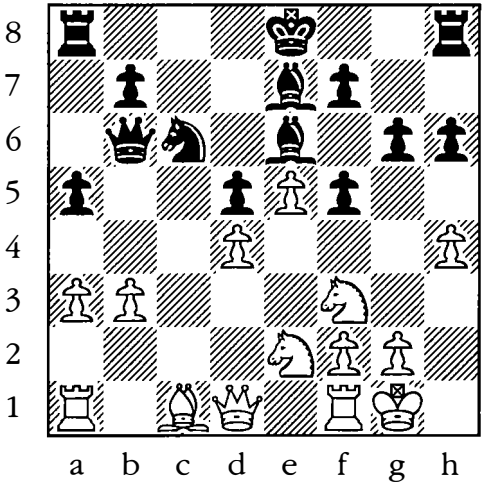
With the black pawn now on f5, it supports a direct kingside attack with ...g5 and ...h5.

After the exchange on f5, Black should avoid playing ...f6 to undermine White's central pawns as this would simply give White a passed e-pawn.



Position after 12...exf5

13 ♘c3 ♗e6 14 ♘e2 h6 15 h4 g6



Position after 15...g6

With 14 ♘e2 White plans to manoeuvre his knight to a good square on f4 where it will attack important points in Black's position on d5 and e6.

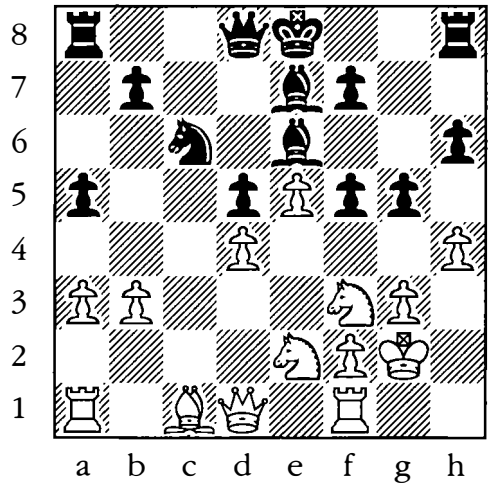
With 14...h6 Black prepares to launch a kingside offensive with ...g5. However,

after 15 h4 Black is forced to play 15...g6, as this prevents White from cramping Black's position with 16 h5 and 17 ♘f4.

Black's subsequent play is extremely direct as he plays for immediate counterplay on the kingside.

Since the position in the centre is closed, it is okay for Black to leave his king in the centre as there are not many open lines for White to attack with.

16 g3 ♕d8 17 ♔g2 g5



Position after 17...g5

Black achieves excellent counterplay on the kingside and deprives White of the important f4-square. If necessary Black can even hide his king on d7 to connect his heavy pieces on the back rank to support the offensive on the h-file. Black's position is very comfortable, and Korchnoi went on to score a fine win.

In summary, this game demonstrates the latent potential of the French Defence and a very powerful idea of attacking on the kingside with the mass of pawns created by White's early exchange of bishop for knight on f5.

French Defence: Conclusion

The popular 3 ♘c3, the Tarrasch Variation with 3 ♘d2, the Exchange Variation with 3 exd5, and the Advance Variation with 3 e5 are the main lines that White can employ against the French Defence. However, you can also see some different sidelines from White that should not be as good against accurate play by Black. Remember the general, basic concepts of opening play and how to apply them to

the French Defence structure and typical plans. No matter what move order or sideline White may employ, Black should continue with active development and strive to create threats as quickly as possible in the opening and early middle-game.

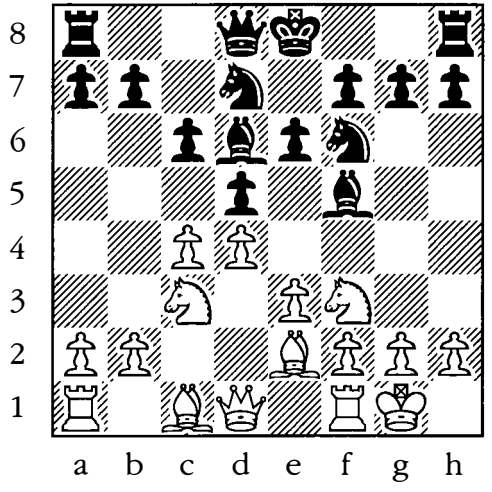
As with almost any other chess opening, there is not one single best formula or move order – rather you have to react to your opponent's ideas and figure out how to best combat them.

Slav Defence – Schallopp Variation

Now that you can play the Stonewall Attack with White and the French Defence with Black against 1 e4, let's take a look at the Slav Defence, Schallopp Variation, so you can build a reliable answer to 1 d4. Together these three openings represent a comprehensive opening repertoire for the beginner chess player.

Examining the big picture of this opening system, you will find that the general ideas and pawn formations are very similar – enabling you to focus more on understanding general positional concepts and patterns of development and less on memorization of move orders.

The Slav Defence operates on similar principles found in the Stonewall Attack and the French Defence, in that the pawns will be placed primarily on one colour (the light squares c6, d5, e6) and the pieces will emphasize control of the dark squares in the centre (c5, d6, e5).



General Structure in the Slav Defence, Schallopp Variation

Of all three openings, the Slav Defence is definitely the most complex. There are just so many complicated lines that I have decided to focus mainly on the Schallopp Variation because it is the simplest to learn and still very effective. The credibility of the Schallopp Variation is enhanced by its regular use at the top level by Super-GMs: Alexey Shirov, Boris Gelfand, and Alexey Dreev.

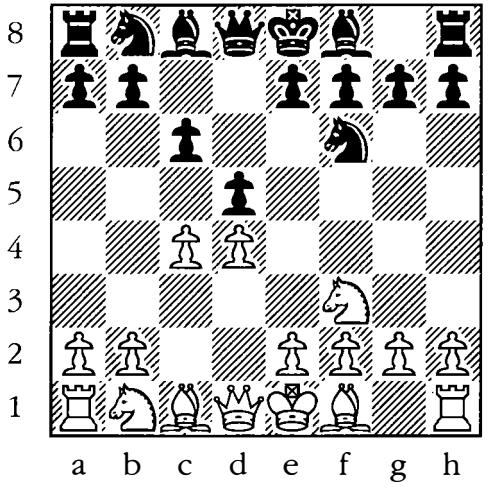
The Schallopp Variation is distinguished from other lines in the Slav Defence because it thematically involves the deployment of the light-squared bishop to f5, where it will be active and outside of the pawn chain (e6, d5, c6).

White's main methods to attack the Slav Defence, Schallopp Variation, involve exchanging his kingside knight for Black's light-squared bishop with an early ♘h4, quickly exchanging pawns in the centre with cxd5 to open lines on the queenside, and closed attacks on the queenside with pawn advances like c4-c5 and b2-b4-b5. Depending on Black's response, White can combine any of these ideas together to be more effective.

Slav Defence, Schallopp Variation with an Early ♘h4 by White

Let's review the big picture on main lines in the Schallopp Variation involving an early ♘f3, e3, and ♘h4 by White.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6

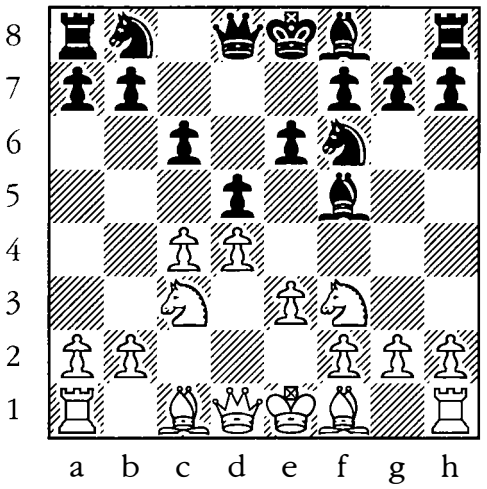


Position after 3...♘f6

It is important to be accurate with the move order for Black and develop first with the knight on f6, not with the bishop. Black should protect his d5-pawn and

also by leaving the bishop on c8 for another move, he is still protecting the b7-pawn (reducing the effect of an immediate ♕b3 by White).

4 e3 ♗f5 5 ♘c3 e6



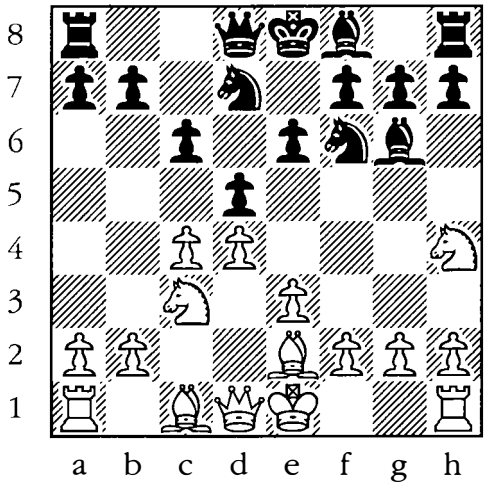
Position after 5...e6

Black has established a very firm foundation of pawns in the centre. Normally his light-squared bishop would be considered a 'bad' bishop; however, it has made it outside of the pawn chain and landed on a very active diagonal.

While White has a lot of different moves and plans at his disposal in this type of position, he normally goes with ♘h4 to exchange his knight for Black's light-squared bishop.

We will begin with an example from the game **Inarkiev vs. Shirov** (Poikovsky 2008):

6 ♘h4 ♗g6 7 ♗e2 ♘bd7



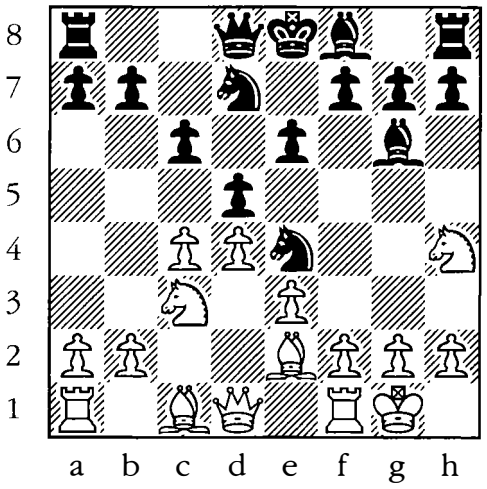
Position after 7...♘bd7

Black played 6...♗g6 because he didn't want White to weaken his pawn structure with ♘xf5. Although White can still double Black's pawns with ♘xg6, Black's pawn structure will remain tight, and it is not as easy for White to attack.

Also, it is more accurate to develop the queenside knight with ...♘bd7 before developing the dark-squared bishop on f8. It is more flexible to develop the knight first because it almost always wants to go to d7. However, the dark-squared bishop can go to d6 or e7, and it is better to wait to see what White does to determine which square will work best.

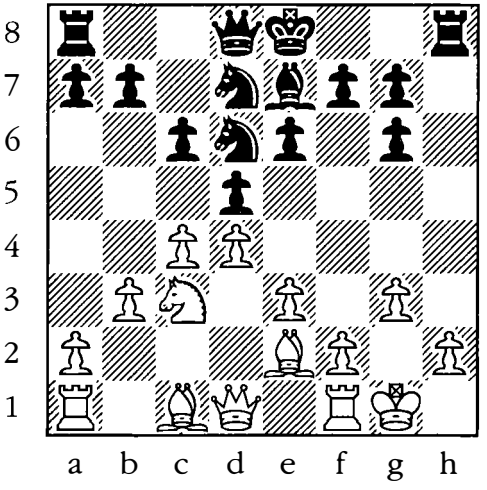
8 0-0 ♘e4

Black plays sharply to attack White's h4-knight with 8...♘e4 for several reasons: he wants to force White to play ♘xg6 and clarify the position, he might want to trade a pair of knights with ...♘xc3, or he can reposition the knight to a great square on d6 where it will control a lot of important central squares.



Position after 8...♘e4

9 g3 ♘d6 10 b3 ♗e7 11 ♘xg6 hxg6



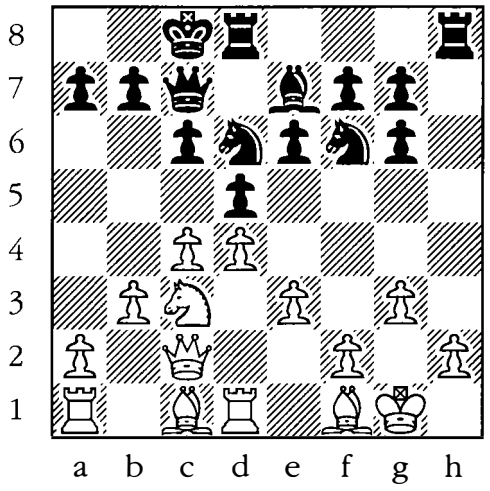
Position after 11...hxg6

White chose to maintain the tension by defending his knight with 9 g3 and defending his c4-pawn with 10 b3; however, with 10...♗e7 Black finally forced the exchange on g6. Black now has a strong position in the centre and an open h-file

to attack with his rooks.

The game continued:

12 ♕c2 ♘f6 13 ♖d1 ♕c7 14 ♗f1 0-0-0



Position after 14...0-0-0

Black could have also chosen to castle kingside and play in the centre with ideas like ...dxc4 and ...e5 or ...c5. We will examine this alternative in the next example.

After castling queenside, Black can still play actively in the centre, but he also opens up the option of directly attacking White's king by doubling rooks on the open h-file.

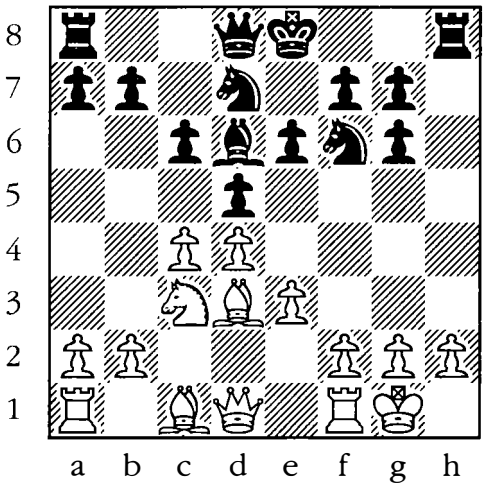
If White tries to block the h-file by moving his pawn to h3 or h4, Black can slam it open by pushing up his doubled g-pawns.

This game should show you the flexibility of the Schallopp Variation of the Slav Defence, as Black maintains a variety of different plans throughout the opening and early middlegame.

Black is guaranteed a good position if he develops his pieces actively in the centre.

Black Castles Kingside and Plays in the Centre

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 e3 ♗f5 5 ♘c3 e6 6 ♘h4 ♗g6 7 ♘xg6 hxg6 8 ♗d3 ♘bd7 9 0-0 ♗d6



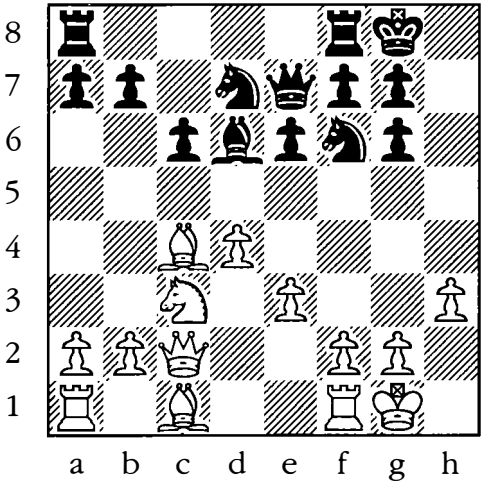
Position after 9...♗d6

We are following an excerpt from the game **Carlsen vs. Gelfand** (Moscow 2012):

White has the two bishops; however, Black has achieved some nice pressure on the h-file and a very solid position in the centre.

Black's position is very flexible – he can aim to castle kingside or queenside in the next few moves.

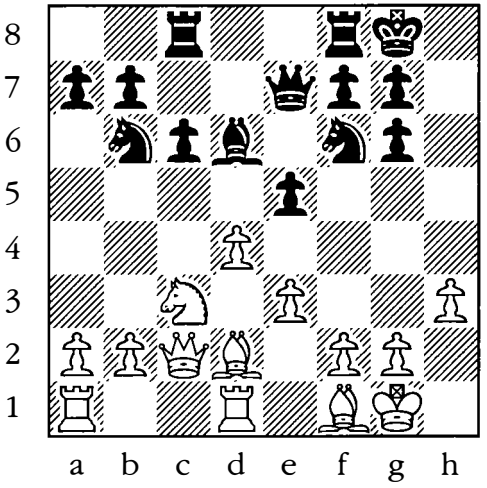
10 h3 dxc4 11 ♗xc4 0-0 12 ♕c2 ♕e7



Position after 12...♕e7

Black works to complete his development and now threatens to equalize in the centre with ...c5 or ...e5.

13 ♖d1 ♖ac8 14 ♗d2 ♘b6 15 ♗f1 e5



Position after 15...e5

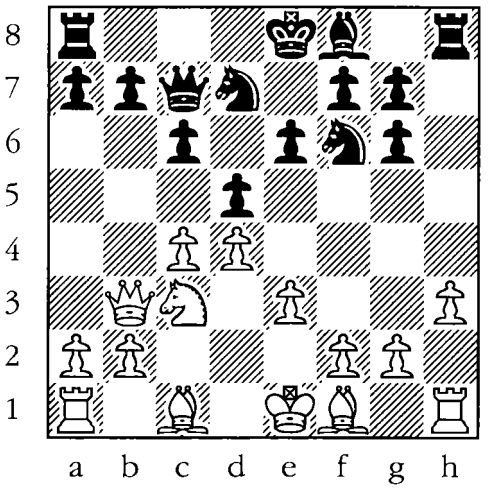
After a few preparatory moves, Black opens the centre and achieves an even position.

This game serves as an excellent example for Black if you are more interested in the lines involving kingside castling, which tend to be less complicated than the lines with queenside castling.

How to Attack if White Castles Queenside?

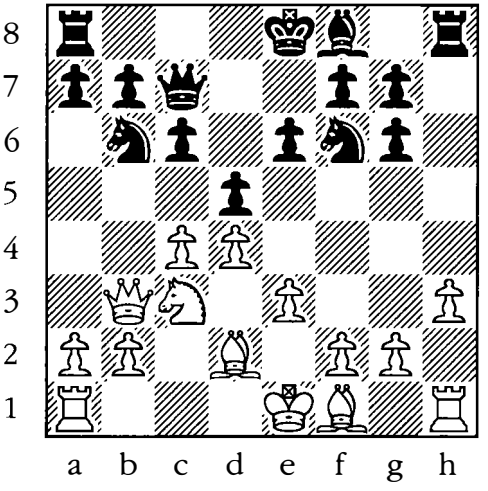
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 e3 ♗f5 5 ♘c3 e6 6 ♘h4 ♗g6 7 ♕b3 ♕c7 8 ♘xg6 hxg6 9 h3 ♘bd7

Black has a very solid position in the centre and can castle kingside or queenside.



Position after 9...♘bd7

10 ♗d2 ♘b6

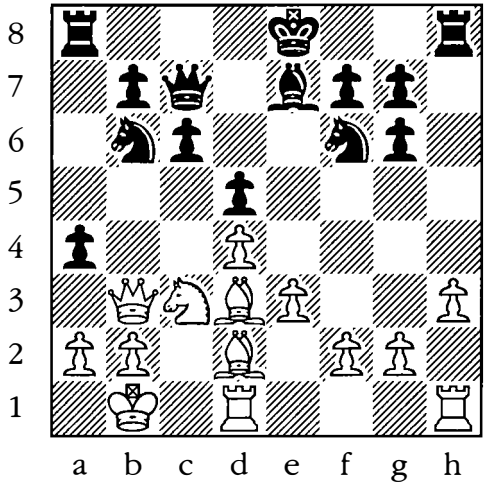


Position after 10...♘b6

This is an interesting idea. Black provokes White to make a weakening move with 11 c5, after which Black can easily undermine White's pawn centre with 11...♘bd7 and 12...b6.

It is better for White to play 11 cxd5. After this exchange of pawns on d5, Black should recapture with the e-pawn to maintain a more harmonious pawn structure and obtain the half-open e-file for his rooks.

11 cxd5 exd5 12 ♗d3 ♗e7 13 0-0-0 a5 14 ♔b1 a4



Position after 14...a4

Black reacts very energetically to White's queenside castling, attacking immediately to open lines against White's king and achieve a strong initiative.

This example once more demonstrates the advantages of the flexibility found in the Schallopp Variation of the Slav Defence. It is difficult for White to attack because Black can castle kingside or queenside. On the flip side, Black has counterplay on the h-file and by pushing his g-pawn if White castles kingside. And if White castles queenside, Black is also ready to blast open lines as in the above example.

Slav Defence – Other Main Lines

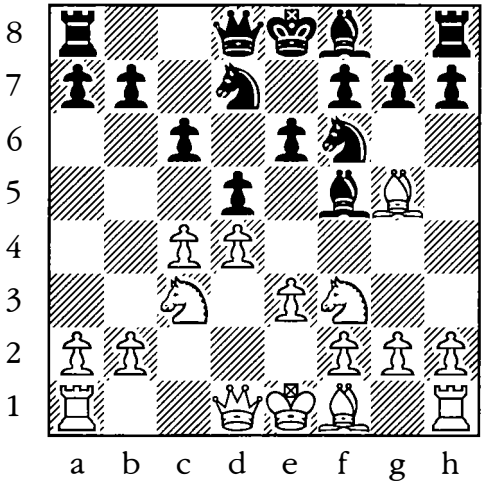
As you go through this section and prepare to add the Slav Defence to your opening repertoire, you should keep in mind that the basic principles of the opening still apply. Play to control the centre and make this your first priority in the opening. *Strive to develop your pieces and make a new threat with every move, setting your opponent new problems at every possible chance.*

Due to the closed/stable nature of most positions in the Schallopp Variation of the Slav Defence, it is often the case that you can wait to decide where you want

to castle and guard your king but it should definitely be done before the position opens. It is very important to avoid memorization of specific move orders and, instead, try to understand the reasons behind the moves.

How to Play Against an Early ♗g5 by White

1 d4 d5 2 ♘f3 ♗f5 3 c4 e6 4 ♘c3 ♘f6 5 ♗g5 c6 6 e3 ♘bd7



Position after 6...♘bd7

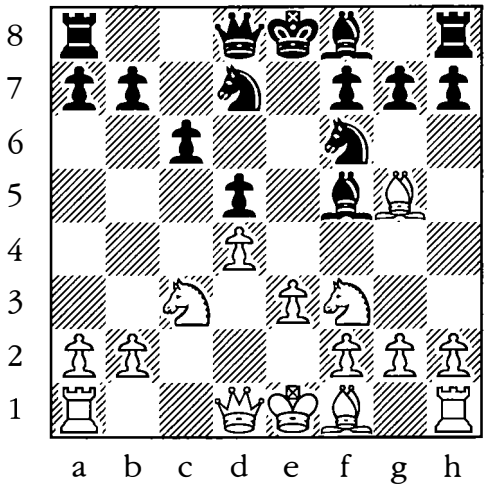
White has placed his dark-square bishop actively on g5 and Black has developed very solidly. Black's dark-squared bishop very rarely goes to b4 in the Schallopp Variation so now we have to make the typical choice of developing it to d6 or e7.

Against the ♗g5 lines by White, it will make sense for Black to place the dark-squared bishop on e7 to break the pin along the h4-d8 diagonal.

We are now following an excerpt from the game **Ibrahim vs. Linksiy** (Montreal 2000):

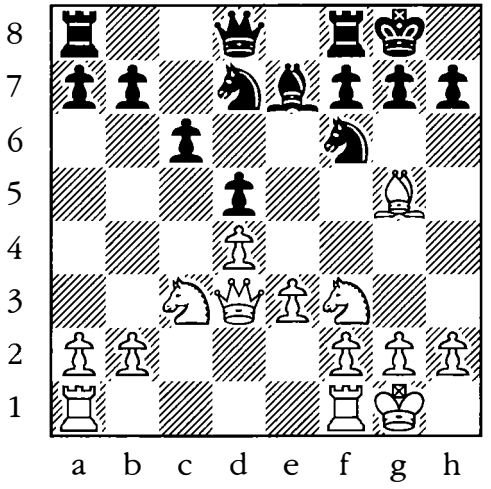
7 cxd5 exd5

It may seem strange that Black is recapturing away from the centre; however, it is with good reason. Black's pawn structure remains very fluid; he does not give up the b5-square to White's pieces, and he can now control the centre more due to his half-open e-file.



Position after 7...exd5

8 ♗d3 ♗xd3 9 ♕xd3 ♗e7 10 0-0 0-0



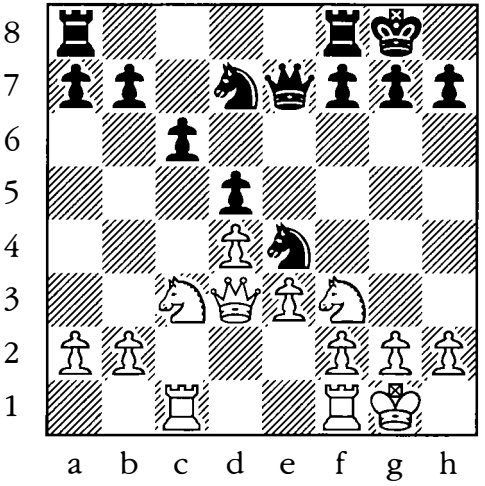
Position after 10...0-0

White is threatening to gain space in the centre and attack on the kingside if he has time to play ♘e5 and f4, so Black should act quickly and, at the least, exchange a pair of knights. Black should aim to play ...♘e4 so that he can bring his

d7-knight to f6 and smoothly control more of the centre.

White can also attack on the queenside with b2-b4-b5 later; however, Black can still respond powerfully with play in the centre and ideas like ...♘e4 as seen in this game.

11 ♖ac1 ♘e4! 12 ♗xe7 ♕xe7

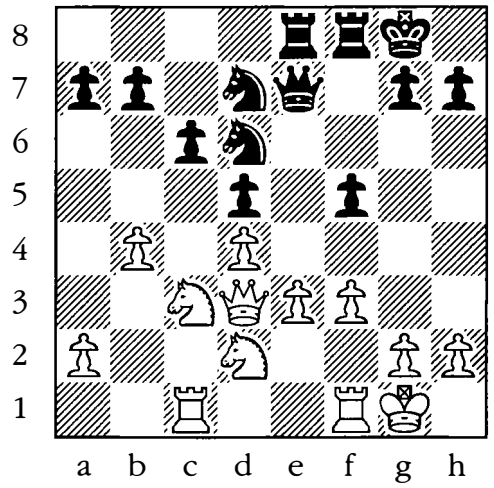


Position after 12...♕xe7

The manoeuvre 11...♘e4! is incredibly effective against lines involving ♗g5 by White, as Black seizes a very strong initiative in the centre. White's pieces are now very restricted and Black's plan is simple – complete development and expand in the centre and kingside.

13 ♘d2 ♘d6 14 f3 f5 15 b4 ♖ae8

Black's position is picturesque. His pieces are perfectly coordinated in the centre, and White's play on the queenside should not be adequate.

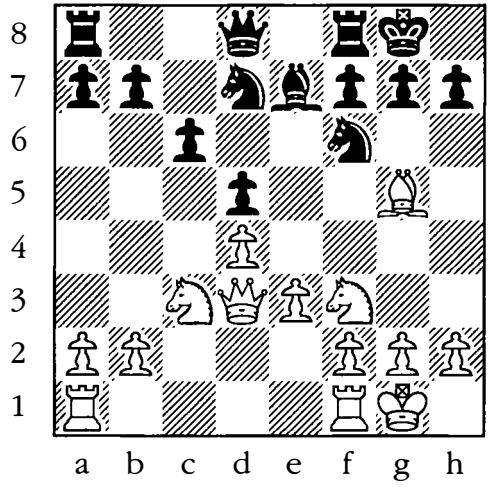


Position after 15...♖ae8

What if White Exchanges ♗g5 x ♘f6?

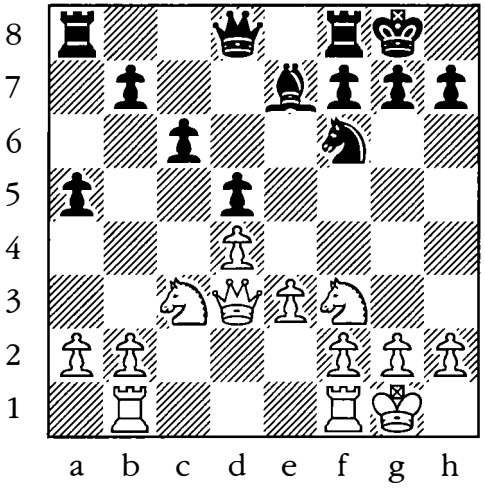
This next game is very similar to the previous one; however, White does not allow the simplifying manoeuvre ...♘e4 and instead gives up his dark-squared bishop with 11 ♗xf6, to aim for dynamic activity on the queenside.

1 d4 d5 2 ♘f3 ♗f5 3 c4 e6 4 ♘c3 ♘f6 5 ♗g5 c6 6 e3 ♘bd7 7 cxd5 exd5 8 ♗d3 ♗xd3 9 ♕xd3 ♗e7 10 0–0 0–0



Position after 10...0-0

We reached this position in the previous game excerpt; however, from this move on, we will follow a different game: **Krupka vs. Linskiy** (Toronto 1997):
11 ♗xf6 ♘xf6 12 ♖ab1 a5!



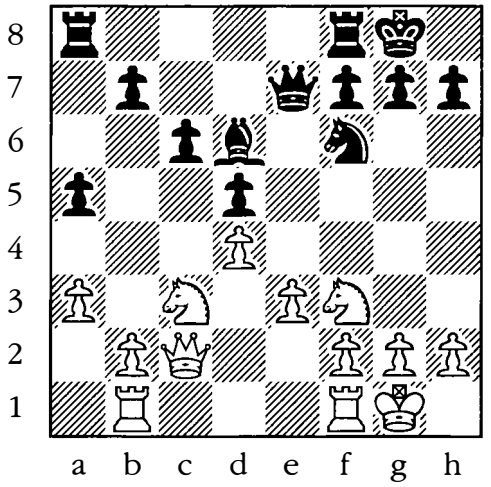
Position after 12...a5!

White played 11 ♗xf6 to stop Black from gaining space with a future ...♘e4, and Black recaptured 11...♘xf6 to activate his knight (much better than recapturing 11...♗xf6 when Black's knight on d7 doesn't have as many good squares to use).

White's 12 ♖ab1 is an obvious attempt to kick-start an initiative with a minority attack on the queenside with b2-b4-b5; however, Black's 12...a5! does an excellent job of stopping White's idea. *The concept of ...a5 to prevent White from starting counterplay on the queenside is very common because it is extremely effective.*
13 a3 ♗d6 14 ♕c2 ♕e7

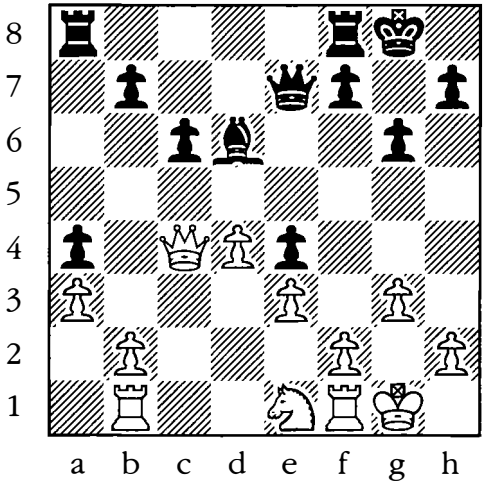
Another great manoeuvre by Black! He rearranges his bishop and queen to prevent White from playing b4 while simultaneously taking control of the e-file and specifically the e5-square.

In the Slav Defence, as in any other opening, you must combine your own energetic play with prophylaxis to prevent your opponent's ideas.



Position after 14...♕e7

15 g3 g6 16 ♘e1 ♘e4 17 ♘xe4 dxe4 18 ♕c4 a4



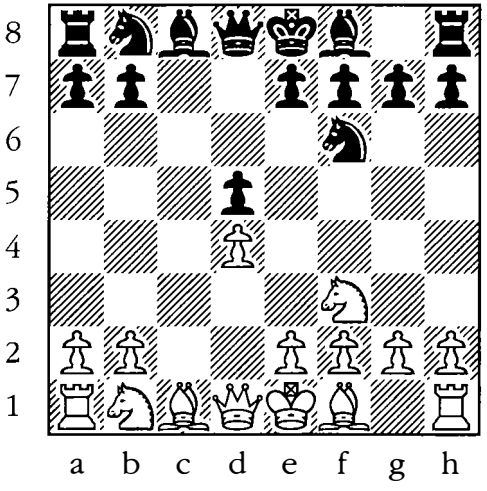
Position after 18...a4

Black achieved the familiar ...♘e4 thrust to gain space in the centre, while totally restricting White's counterplay on the queenside. With 18...a4, it is very difficult for White to break open the b-file because he would almost certainly lose his a3-pawn.

In this position Black has a clear advantage with the most natural plan of playing for a kingside attacking starting with ...f5. In the game Black initiated a dazzling rook lift beginning with ...♖a8-a5-h5, eventually settling the rook on d5! The remaining moves were:

19 ♘c2 ♖a5 20 b4 ♖h5 21 ♖fd1 ♕d7 22 ♕f1 ♖d5 23 ♖dc1 ♔g7 24 ♘e1 f5 25 f4 exf3 26 ♘xf3 h6 27 ♖c2 g5 28 ♕g2 ♕e6 29 ♖e2 ♕e4 30 ♘d2 ♕d3 31 ♖b2 ♕xa3 32 ♘c4 ♕c3 33 ♘b6 a3 34 ♖bc2 a2 35 ♖xa2 ♖b5 36 ♘d7 ♖f7 37 ♘c5 ♖xb4 38 h4 ♗xc5 39 dxc5 ♕xc5 40 ♖ac2 ♕e5 41 h5 c5 42 ♖cd2 ♖e4 43 ♔h2 c4 44 ♖b2 b5 45 ♖a2 b4 46 ♖a6 b3 47 ♖d2 ♖h4+ 48 ♔g1 ♕xe3+ 49 ♕f2 ♕xf2+ 50 ♖xf2 ♖e4 51 ♖d2 c3 0-1

Slav Defence – Exchange Variation



Sample position from Exchange Variation

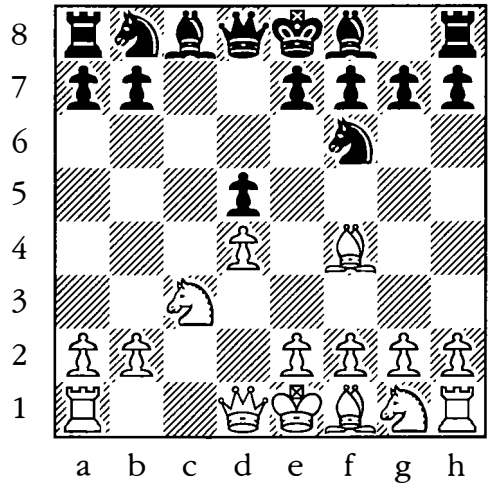
The Exchange Variation looks harmless on the surface, but there are many subtle opening traps that can lead to a dangerous initiative for White on the queenside. In general, I recommend responding to ♕b3 with ...♕c7 rather than ...♕b6; on c7 the queen controls the b8-h2 diagonal whereas after ...♕b6, then ♕xb6 axb6 leaves Black with a pair of weak doubled pawns.

Another important point is to recognize when White delays kingside development and castling to instead try to build up pressure on the c-file and against the knight on c6 with ♗b5, ♘e5, ♖c1, etc. The best response to this queenside pressure is to play an early ...♘d7 as prophylaxis against a ♘e5 invasion by White.

Let's take a look at a few examples on how to neutralize the dangers for Black

in the Exchange Variation of the Slav Defence.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 cxd5 cxd5 5 ♗f4



Position after 5 ♗f4

This is a good starting point in the Exchange Variation. White could have also played 5 ♘f3, 5 ♕b3 or 5 e3; however, the different lines/ideas normally transpose and almost always include ♗f4.

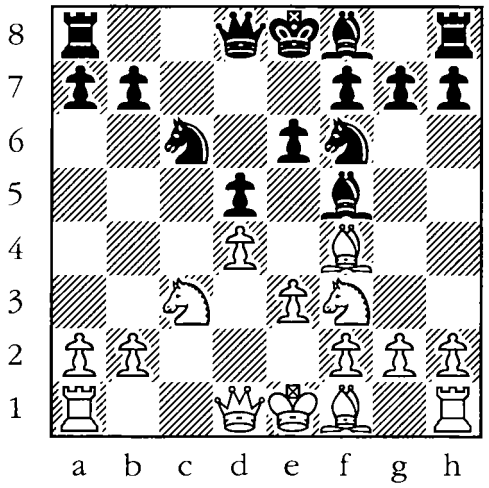
The main idea for White in the Exchange Variation is to achieve rapid pressure on the queenside with the help of the open c-file. White's basic attacking patterns include trying to play ♘b5-c7+ and creating a pin with ♗b5 to increase pressure with a subsequent ♘e5 and ♖c1.

Although the Exchange Variation seems like a pretty tame line, if Black isn't careful early in the opening, he can end up in a bad spot.

5...♘c6 6 e3 ♗f5 7 ♘f3 e6

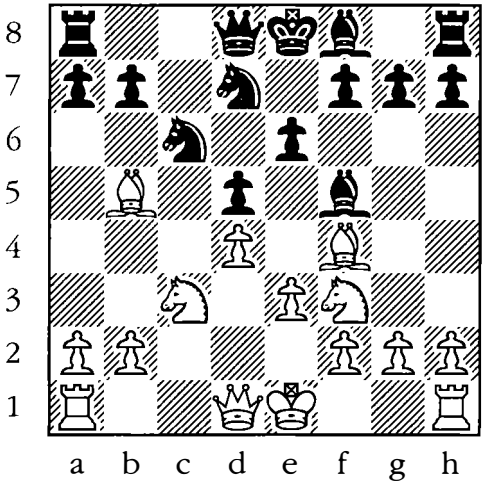
Black develops his light-squared bishop actively to f5, although this does slightly weaken his queenside.

If White tries a superficial tactic like ♘b5 (threatening ♘c7+), Black can simply reply ...♖c8 and ...a6 – gaining free time to activate his pieces.



Position after 7...e6

8 ♗b5 ♘d7

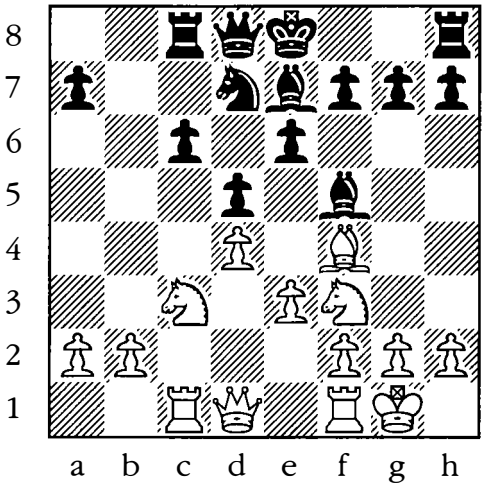


Position after 8...♘d7

This is an extremely important point. If White plays an early ♗b5 to pin Black's knight on c6, Black should quickly respond with ...♘d7 to break the pin and cover the e5-square.

Black must safeguard his knight on c6, as it is very easy for White to rapidly create a dangerous attack against it with moves like ♖c1, ♘e5, etc.

9 0-0 ♗e7 10 ♗xc6 bxc6 11 ♖c1 ♖c8



Position after 11...♖c8

Black has prolonged castling to make sure his position stands well on the queenside. It would be nice to play ...c5 and liberate his backward c6-pawn; however, White should play to gain space and stop that with ♘a4. Black still retains good chances, and we will see how he can really mix it up with a sparkling counterattack.

Creative Kingside Attack Variation

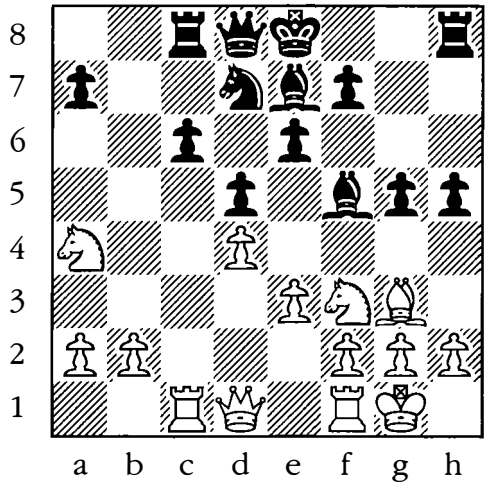
From the previous diagram (the position after 11...♖c8), let's follow the game **Seirawan vs. Beliavsky** (Brussels 1988):

12 ♘a4 g5!? 13 ♗g5 h5

Lightning from a clear sky!

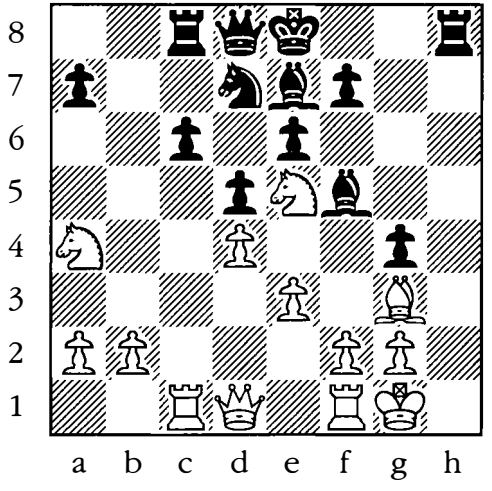
This plan of playing for an instant kingside attack with ...g5 and ...h5 is especially effective when White has played ♗f4 in the opening.

Although White has the long-term positional advantage of pressure on the c-file and control of the important c5-square (to stop Black from pushing ...c6-c5), Black has excellent prospects in the near future on the kingside. It will now be difficult for White to defend his position.



Position after 13...h5

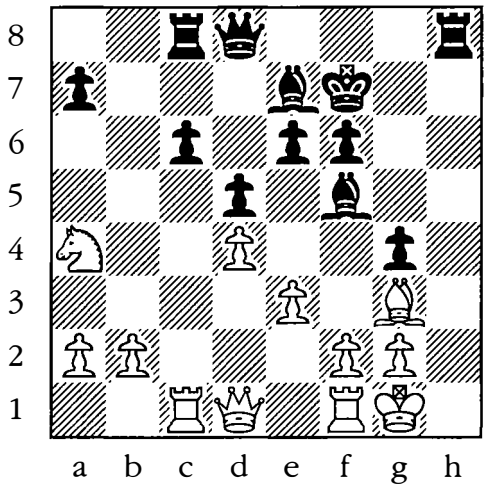
14 h3 g4 15 hxg4 hxg4 16 ♘e5



Position after 16 ♘e5

Black has succeeded in opening the h-file, but he still needs to figure out a way to bring more pieces into the attack quickly before White can distract him into defending the queenside.

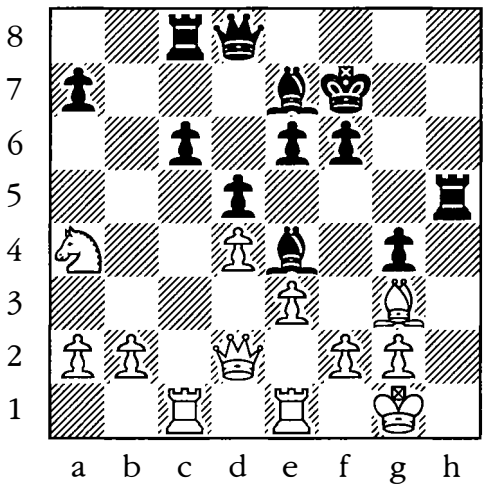
16...♘xe5 17 ♗xe5 f6 18 ♗g3 ♔f7!



Position after 18...♔f7!

Black uncovers a fantastic resource to bring his queen directly into the attack on the h-file.

19 ♖e1 ♖h5 20 ♕d2 ♗e4

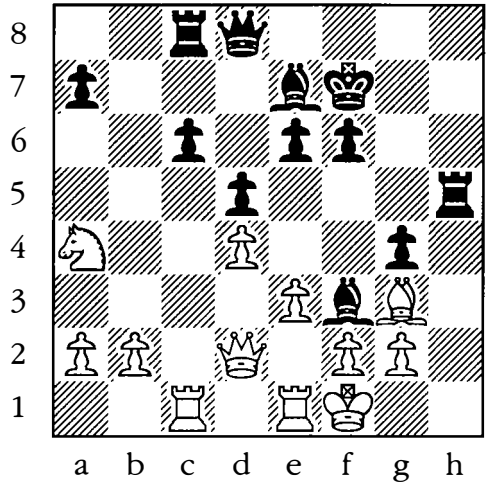


Position after 20...♗e4

Black's pieces hover dangerously around White's king.

White's strategic advantage on the queenside is not felt at all, due to Black's lightning-fast attack on the kingside.

21 ♔f1 ♗f3! White resigns (0-1)



Position after 21...♗f3!

What an incredible finish by Beliavsky!

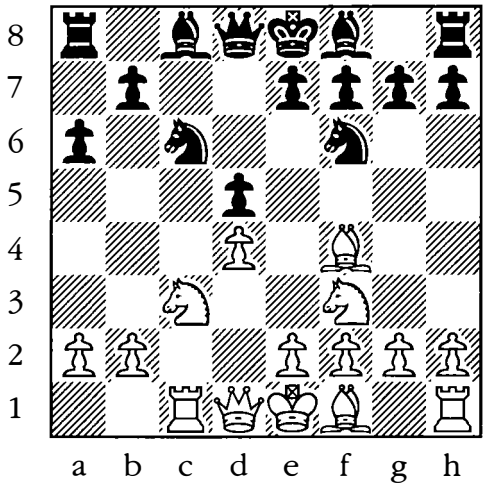
White resigned because he will inevitably be mated on h1 in the next few moves. His king is cut off from escape and the rest of his pieces on the queenside are cut off from defence of the king.

This game is an awesome example of how Black can turn the tables in the Exchange Variation with this ambitious plan of a rapid kingside attack with ...g5 and ...h5. It was essential that Black first played prophylactically on the queenside to prevent White from creating too much pressure. Once Black had locked down the queenside and bought himself time to push forward on the kingside, he never looked back and finished the game with a very accurate attack.

Achieving Activity with Direct Play in the Centre

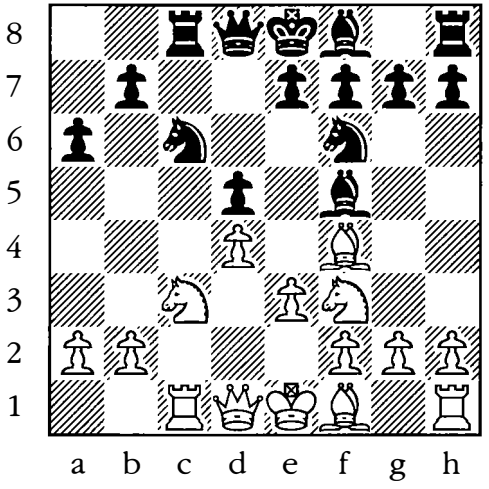
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 cxd5 cxd5 4 ♘c3 ♘f6 5 ♘f3 a6 6 ♗f4 ♘c6 7 ♖c1

Black has played a solid move order with an early ...a6 and ...♘c6, not yet deploying his light-squared bishop to f5, to nullify the potential effect of White playing ♕b3.



Position after 7 ♖c1

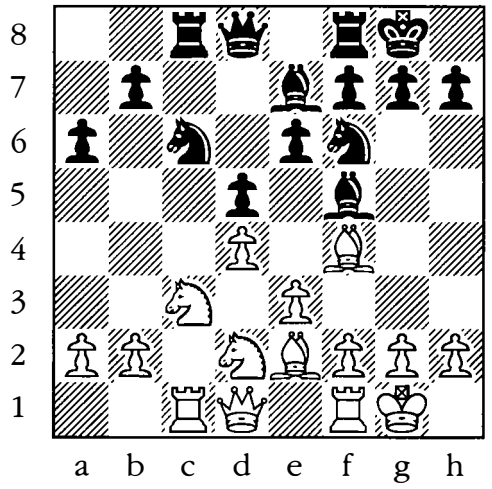
White's move order is quickly targeting Black's queenside and the c-file; however, Black's position is well-coordinated and should not be difficult to defend.
7...♗f5 8 e3 ♖c8



Position after 8...♖c8

Black recognizes that White is building up on the queenside and develops his rook to prevent any quick threats from White.

9 ♗e2 e6 10 0-0 ♗e7 11 ♘d2 0-0



Position after 11...0-0

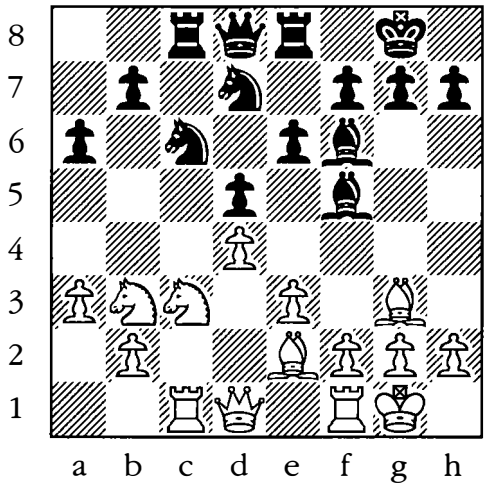
Both sides have now completed development, and it is time to decide on a plan for the middlegame.

With 11 ♘d2 White is signalling that he wants to manoeuvre towards the queenside, perhaps to play a knight on c5 where it will control many important squares in the centre and queenside.

Black chooses a very direct way of obtaining activity by playing to push ...e5 and break the centre open. Although Black will receive an isolated pawn on d5, his energetic piece-play will compensate.

We will now follow the game **Chernin vs. Bacrot** (Bastia 2006):

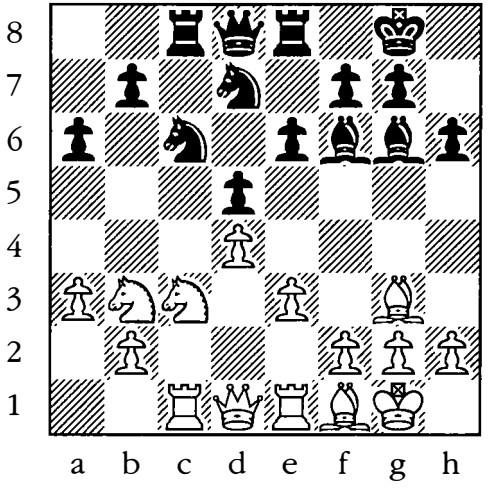
12 a3 ♘d7 13 ♘b3 ♗f6 14 ♗g3 ♖e8



Position after 14...♖e8

Black prepares his entire position for the explosive ...e5 break.

15 ♖e1 h6 16 ♗f1 ♗g6



Position after 16...♗g6

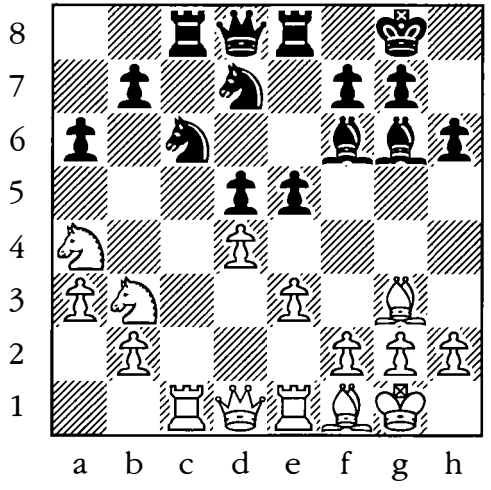
Black plays a few waiting moves to calmly improve his position before breaking with ...e5.

As White has directed his attention toward manoeuvring a knight to c5, he will probably want to play ♘a4 at some point to maintain a knight on c5.

Black is waiting for White to move the knight to the edge of the board before opening the centre. If White does not play ♘a4 soon enough, Black can simply play ...♘b6 to protect his d5-pawn and push ...e5 anyways.

Also, ...h6 and ...♗g6 are good prophylactic measures, as once the position opens, these moves should prove useful.

17 ♘a4 e5!



Position after 17...e5!

Black's position is very tight and well-coordinated so he is perfectly ready to open the centre.

This game is an excellent example of how Black can proceed with prophylactic development on the queenside followed by energetic activity in the centre against the Exchange Variation of the Slav Defence.

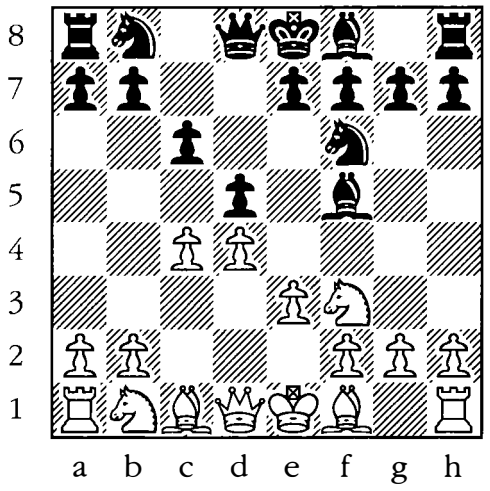
Potential Problems for Black

Now we're going to study a few variations that can give Black a lot of problems if you're not familiar with the most exact move orders and plans.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 e3 ♗f5

With the above move order chosen by White (an early ♘f3 and e3), Black has nothing to worry about and can deploy his light-squared bishop immediately to f5. In the above position, Black can respond to 5 cxd5 cxd5 6 ♕b3 with 6...♕c7 – as

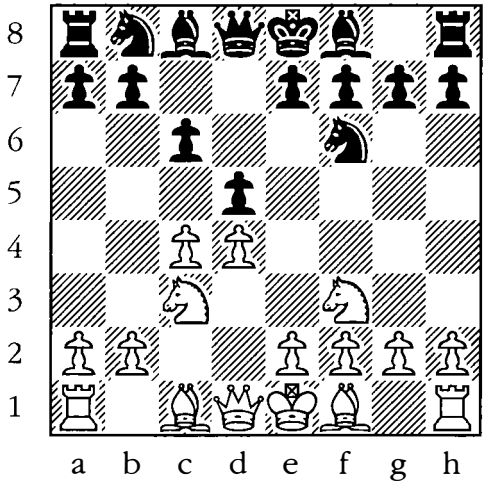
Black's d5-pawn is defended by his knight on f6.



Position after 4...♗f5

Now let's look at a line where White's move order indicates that Black should be careful to avoid the early ...♗f5.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3



Position after 4 ♘f3

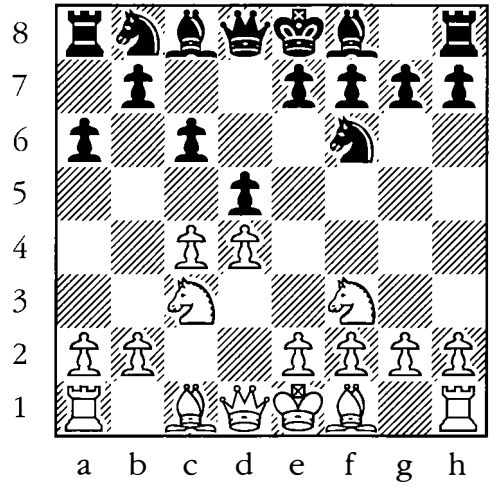
Here 4...♗f5 would get Black in trouble, as after 5 cxd5 cxd5 6 ♕b3 it is very difficult to defend the b7-pawn and d5-pawns. Black faces a similar dilemma if White plays 4 e3 instead of 4 ♘f3. Before playing ...♗f5 in the Slav Defence, make sure you won't have a problem if White immediately captures cxd5 and plays ♕b3 (usually that results in the lines where White plays an early ♘c3).

Introducing the Chameleon Variation with 4...a6

Flexibility is required to succeed with any opening, and here it could not be clearer – Black must adopt a new scheme against White's versatile move order. I recommend 4...a6 – a line that has become extremely popular at the higher levels in the 21st century, and is known as the Chebanenko Variation or the Chameleon Variation (I'll refer to it as the Chameleon Variation – I like to emphasize the flexibility). The foremost practitioners of the Chameleon Variation are Alexey Shirov and Victor Bologan, although many other strong grandmasters regularly employ this defence.

Now let's examine the main lines to illustrate how Black can fight for more than equality with an incredibly solid pawn chain in the centre, and often on the queenside with a future ...b5 push.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 a6



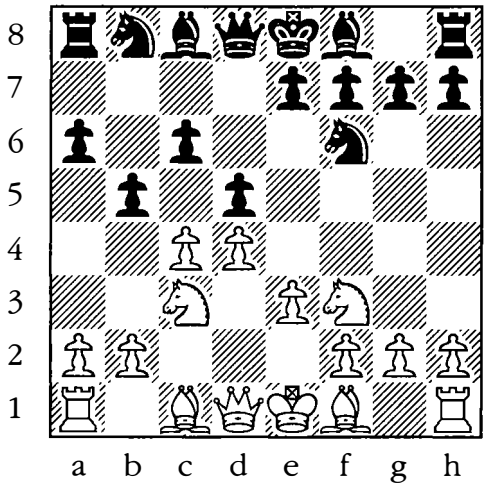
Position after 4...a6

There are four main continuations for White after 4...a6 in the Chameleon Variation: 5 e3, 5 c5, 5 ♕b3, and 5 cxd5. If White isn't careful and plays a move like 5

5 g3, you can simply snatch the c4-pawn and you will be well-prepared to keep that extra pawn by backing it up with a quick ...b5 push.

We will examine the first three choices in the following examples – for 5...cxd5 you should refer to the section on the Exchange Variation as this essentially transposes (the flexible move ...a6 is very useful for Black in the Exchange Variation).

5 e3 b5



Position after 5...b5

Against 5 e3, the immediate ...b5 push works great for Black. He immediately gains space on the queenside, pressures White's c4-pawn, and may threaten ...b5-b4 to push White's c3-knight back. White has three basic choices after 5...b5 – he can play 6 b3, 6 c5, and 6 cxb5.

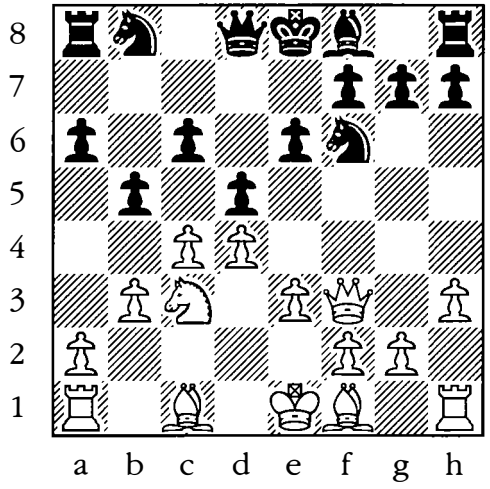
After 6 c5, White has completely closed the position. It is easy for Black to play with the main ideas being to exchange off the light-squared bishop with a quick ...♗g4 and ...♗xf3, fianchettoing the kingside bishop with ...g6 and ...♗g7, gaining space on the queenside by pushing the a- and b-pawns, and trying to break open the centre and gain space with a well-prepared ...e7-e5 push.

After 6 cxb5, the position is the same as after 6 cxd5 – Black should recapture with his c-pawn. This position is also very easy to play for Black as he simply has more space on the queenside. Black can continue with a quick ...♗g4 to exchange off his light-squared bishop, or he can develop the bishop to b7 where it will retain influence on the centre and the important e4-square.

Now we will examine the most popular line, 6 b3, where White maintains the

pressure in the centre. For an effective demonstration of Black's resources to fight actively for an advantage, we will follow the game **Oll vs. Anand** (Biel 1993).

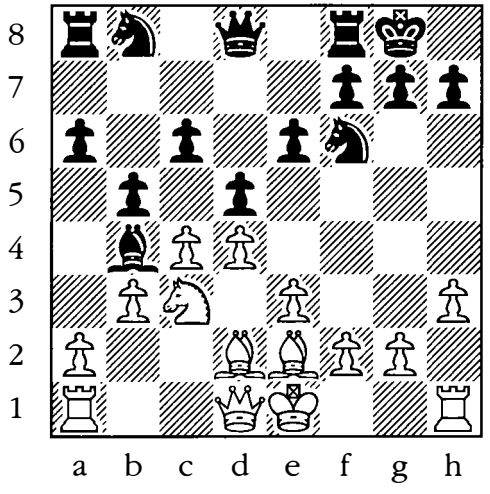
6 b3 ♗g4 7 h3 ♗xf3 8 ♕xf3 e6



Position after 8...e6

Black immediately exchanges his light-squared bishop and will now look to complete his development, castle, and open the centre.

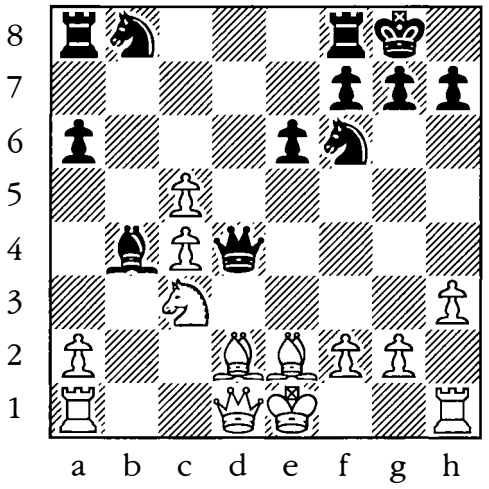
9 ♗d2 ♗b4 10 ♕d1 0-0 11 ♗e2



Position after 11 ♗e2

Black's position is rock-solid and he is ready to open the centre to take advantage of the fact that White has not yet castled. There is no need to play an automatic developing move like 11...♘bd7 – it is much better to play dynamically and break the centre.

11...bxc4 12 bxc4 c5 13 dxc5 d4 14 exd4 ♕xd4



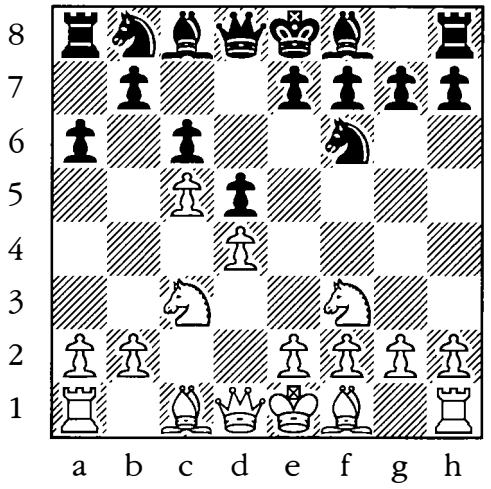
Position after 14...♕xd4

Black has achieved an excellent position from the opening because he rejected automatic development for targeted forcing moves. This is a very nice example of how to play against 6 b3 – immediately exchanging off the 'bad' light-squared bishop with 6...♗g4, followed by rapid development and a well-timed opening of the centre.

Now let's look at another critical line against the Chameleon Variation: 5 c5 – the Advance Variation.

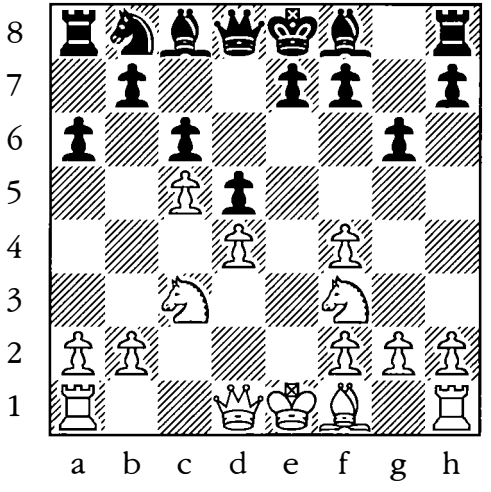
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 a6 5 c5

The move 5 c5 is an extremely logical response to the Chameleon Variation with 4...a6, as White immediately tries to exploit the newly weakened b6-square. The Advance Variation with 5 c5 is a dangerous weapon for White; however, Black has more than adequate resources. There are a few different ways to play this for Black but I believe the best method is to fianchetto the kingside bishop and aim to exploit White's pawn on c5 by opening the centre with ...e7-e5.



Position after 5 c5

We are now following the game **Geirnaert vs. Hovhanisian** (Leuven 2012):
5...g6 6 ♗f4 ♘h5 7 e3 ♘xf4 8 exf4



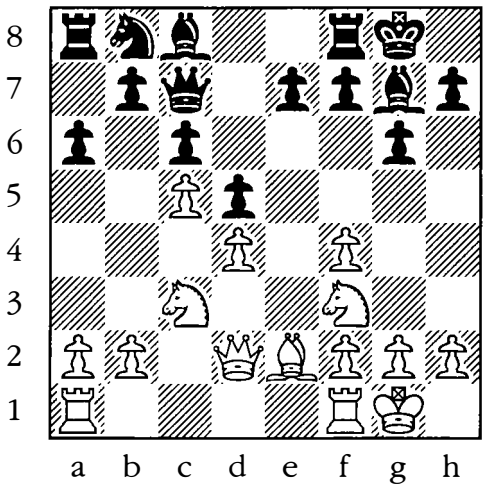
Position after 8 exf4

By exchanging the knight for White's dark-squared bishop, Black makes his slightly cramped position more comfortable. The basic rule applies here that if you

have less space, trading pieces will help you. It is important to respond immediately to ♗f4 with ...♘h5 as you don't want to give White a chance to tuck his bishop away by playing h2-h3.

In view of what happens in the game, it might have been wiser for White to retreat with 7 ♗d2, to keep his dark-squared bishop.

8...♗g7 9 ♗e2 ♕c7 10 ♕d2 0-0 11 0-0

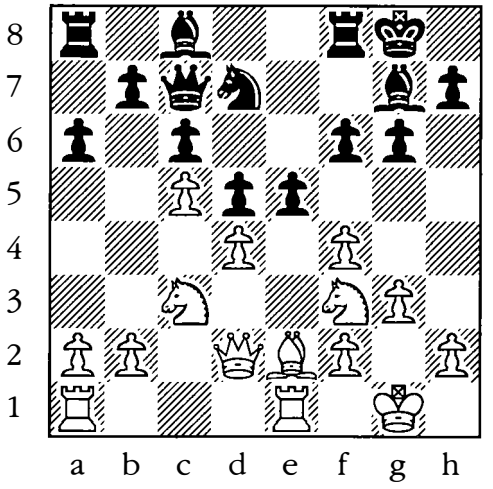


Position after 11 0-0

The move 9...♕c7 was a nice way to develop and place pressure on White's doubled f4-pawn. After 11 0-0, Black has a few options. He can play to exchange his light-squared bishop with ...♗g4; however, I really like the plan chosen by Black in this example where he plays for a very quick ...f6 and ...e5. If you can get this move in fast enough, you're going to have a very comfortable game with the black pieces in this line.

11...f6 12 g3 ♘d7 13 ♖fe1 e5

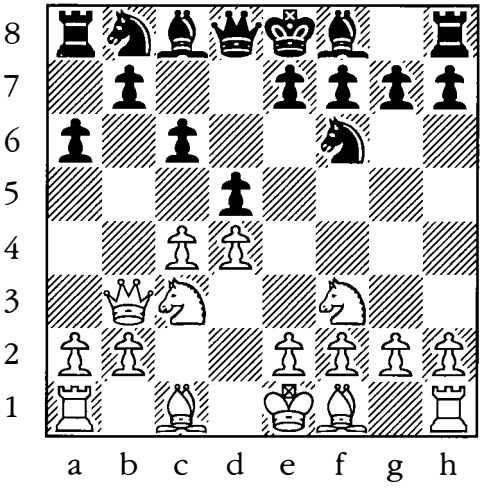
Black is clearly better, as White's pieces lack coordination and Black has a very easy plan to gain space with ...e5-e4 and ...f6-f5. White is essentially unable to initiate a mass exchange on e5 because his c5-pawn is over-extended and very weak. This is an awesome example of how achieving the ...e7-e5 break can exploit White's early c4-c5 push!



Position after 13...e5

Now we're going to look at another option for White against the Chameleon Variation with 4...a6, where White brings out the queen quickly with 5 ♕b3 – defending his c4-pawn and pressuring Black's d5- and b7-pawns.

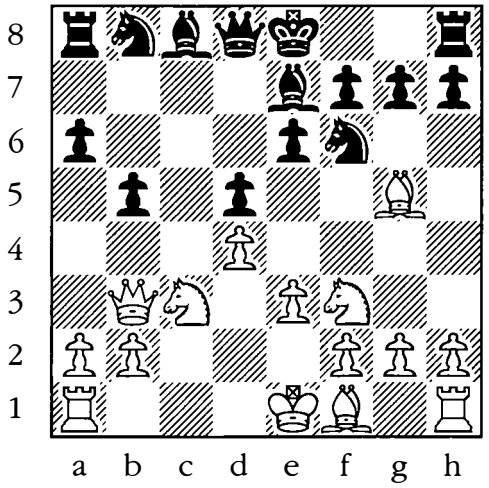
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 a6 5 ♕b3



Position after 5 ♕b3

Black has a variety of options at his disposal here: 5...dxc4, 5...g6, 5...e6, and 5...b5. I'm going to focus on 5...b5, as this line is very straightforward and fits in well with other variations we have examined in similar systems in the Chameleon Variation.

5...b5 6 cxd5 cxd5 7 ♗g5 e6 8 e3 ♗e7



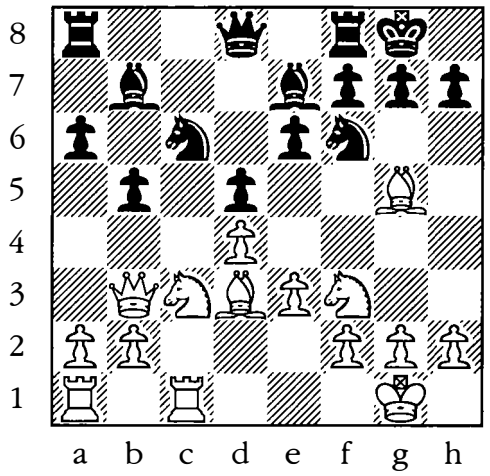
Position after 8...♗e7

Black has a solid position with extra space on the queenside. If White tries to undermine Black's pawns with a2-a4, Black can simply push ...b5-b4 and will gain even more space while pushing back White's knight.

We are now following the game **Melkumyan vs. Simonian** (Jurmek 2012):

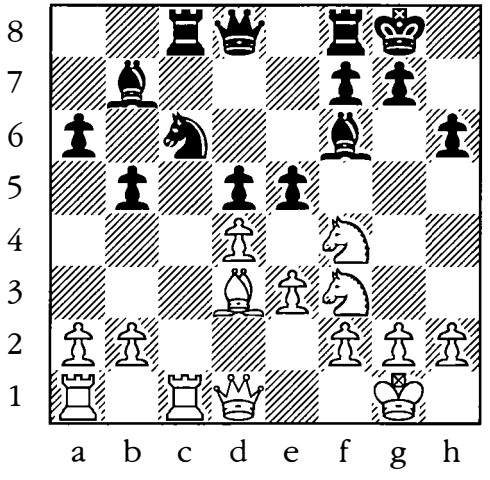
9 ♗d3 ♘c6 10 0-0 ♗b7 11 ♖fc1 0-0

Black's position from the opening is very strong and he has a number of good plans at his disposal. The main ideas in this type of position would be to play on the queenside with moves like ...♖c8, ...♘a5-c4, ...♘d7-b6 and ...b5-b4. If White is able to neutralize Black's queenside play, Black can also play in the centre by aiming for the ...e5-break.



Position after 11...0-0

In this example, Black chose a quick plan to break the centre:
12 ♘e2 ♖c8 13 ♘f4 h6 14 ♗xf6 ♗xf6 15 ♕d1 e5

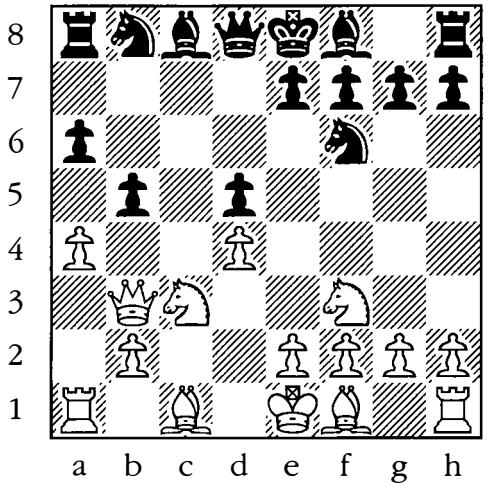


Position after 15...e5

Black has a great position and he breaks with 15...e5 to open lines for his two bishops. Although Black will probably be left with an isolated pawn on d5, the energetic activity of his pieces and two bishops will provide ample compensation.

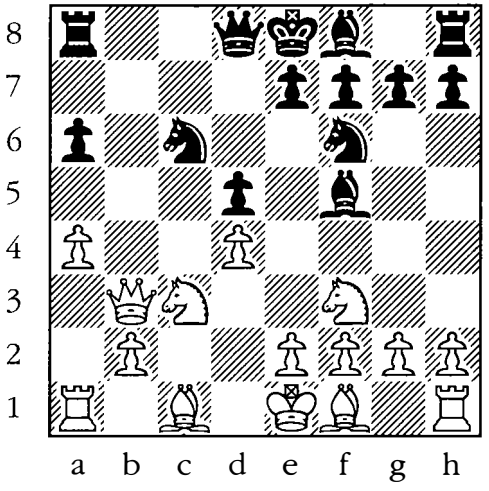
Now let's see what happens in another line, where White challenges Black's

early ...b5 push at once with a quick a4 to undermine Black's queenside pawns.
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 a6 5 ♕b3 b5 6 cxd5 cxd5 7 a4



Position after 7 a4

This looks like a great way for White to take advantage of Black's numerous early pawn moves on the queenside; however, Black has a fantastic resource – a forcing pawn sacrifice to seize a powerful initiative.
7...b4! 8 ♕xb4 ♘c6 9 ♕b3 ♗f5



Position after 9...♗f5

Black has excellent compensation for the sacrificed pawn and now threatens ...♖b8 and ...♘b4. White is unable to immediately attack Black's bishop on f5 with ♘h4 as Black could simply capture White's d4-pawn with ...♘xd4. White is in serious trouble in the above diagram as he is too far behind in development and it will take him too long to castle and get his king out of the centre.

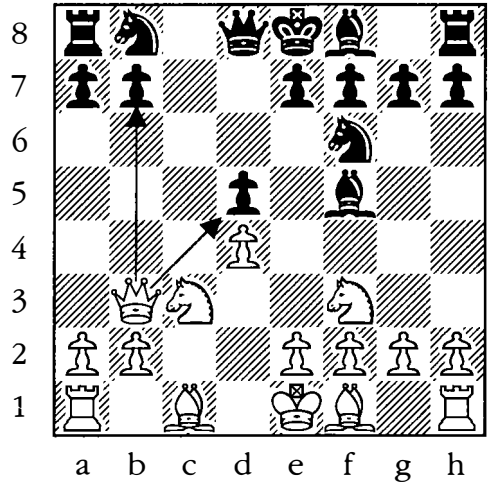
If White refuses to accept the sacrificed pawn with 8 ♕xb4, he will have to play his knight back to a2 or b1 – conceding precious time and space as a result of 7 a4.

So we have finished examining examples on how to use the Chameleon Variation with 4...a6 against certain move orders by White against the Slav Defence. The main ideas are usually similar to the Schallopp Variation, but the lines are certainly more complicated. The good news is that it is unlikely that White will be familiar with these lines at beginner and intermediate levels.

How to Recover From Playing 4...♗f5 in the Wrong Line

It is still possible that you will mix up the move orders, make a mistake early in the opening and continue with 4...♗f5 aiming for the Schallopp Variation, when it is better to switch gears and play 4...a6 for the Chameleon Variation. In this section, I have provided a nice example on how to recover in this line and achieve a defensible position for Black in the opening.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 ♗f5 5 cxd5 cxd5 6 ♕b3



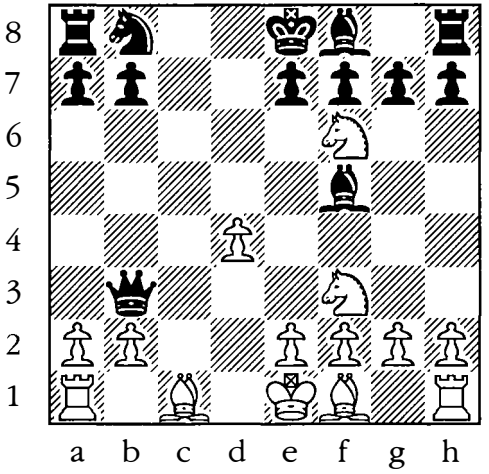
Position after 6 ♕b3

White generates pressure by attacking b7 and d5. Black can defend himself ad-

adequately here, but he needs to be accurate with the move order.

There are many variations Black can employ against 6 ♕b3; however, let's maintain a narrow focus and examine the most direct way for Black to equalize.

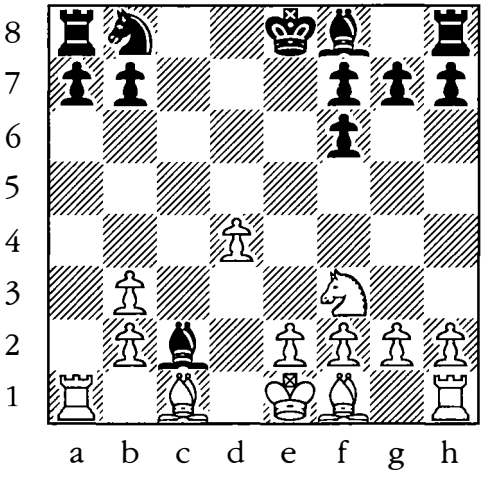
6...♕b6 7 ♘xd5 ♕xb3 8 ♘xf6+!



Position after 8 ♘xf6+!

With this intermediate move White is temporarily winning a pawn; however, Black can win it back by attacking White's doubled b-pawns.

8...gxf6 9 axb3 ♗c2



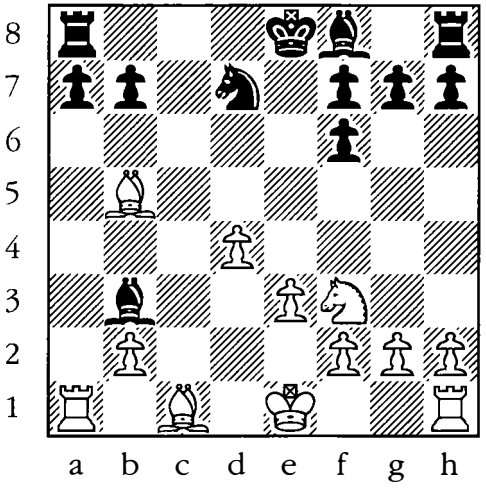
Position after 9...♗c2

If White tries to defend the b3-pawn with 10 ♘d2, Black can respond 10...♗b4, pinning White's knight, followed by ...♗xb3.

Although Black is slightly behind in development in this position, material is equal, and he should be okay if he activates his pieces rapidly.

Play could continue:

10 e3 ♗xb3 11 ♗b5+ ♘d7



Position after 11...♘d7

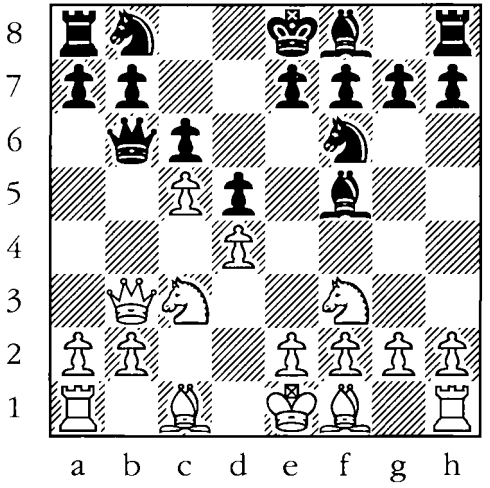
White has achieved a slight initiative; however, Black can adequately defend with moves like ...♗d6, ...♔e7, and ...♖hc8. Note that with the queens off the board, it is not a problem for Black to leave his king in the centre.

This line can be dangerous for Black, but the above example illustrates that with accurate play you can still recover from employing the wrong line and achieve a playable position with Black. White obtains a small initiative, but with an active defence Black should maintain equality.

After 4...♗f5 White can also play an immediate 5 ♕b3, without exchanging pawns on d5, and then push with c4-c5:

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 ♗f5 5 ♕b3 ♕b6 6 c5

White aims for rapid pressure against Black's queenside; however, by pushing the pawn so far and so fast, White is also risking long-term pressure against his potentially overextended centre. It is also important to note that White's c5-pawn is a big potential weakness for White here.

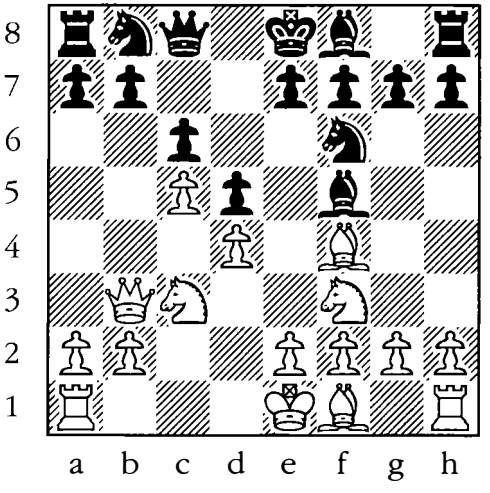


Position after 6 c5

6...♕c7

Black avoids the exchange of queens with 6...♕xb3 because that would give White the open a-file for his rook and instant prospects of action with b3-b4-b5.

7 ♗f4 ♕c8

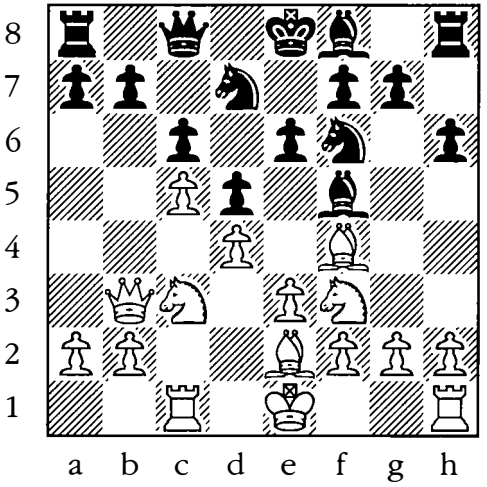


Position after 7...♕c8

Black avoids the trick 7...♕xf4? allowing 8 ♕xb7 when White wins the a8-rook.

Although it may seem that White is pushing Black around, Black will obtain strong counterplay by attacking in the centre with ...e5 in the future – especially due to White's overextended pawn on c5. Now we will follow an excerpt from the game **Gonzalez vs. Bosque** (Ametlla 1998):

8 e3 ♘bd7 9 ♖c1 h6 10 ♗e2 e6



Position after 10...e6

Black is finishing his development and will most likely castle kingside.

White will also castle kingside and then launch an initiative on the queenside with b2-b4, a2-a4, and b5.

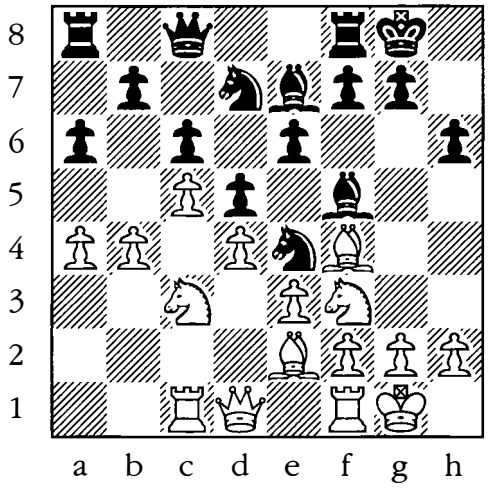
11 ♕d1 ♗e7 12 b4 a6

It is very important for Black to respond immediately to queenside advances like b4 with ...a6 because if White pushes that pawn to b5 at some point, Black should be able to capture with his a-pawn and open the a-file for his rook.

13 0-0 0-0 14 a4 ♘e4!

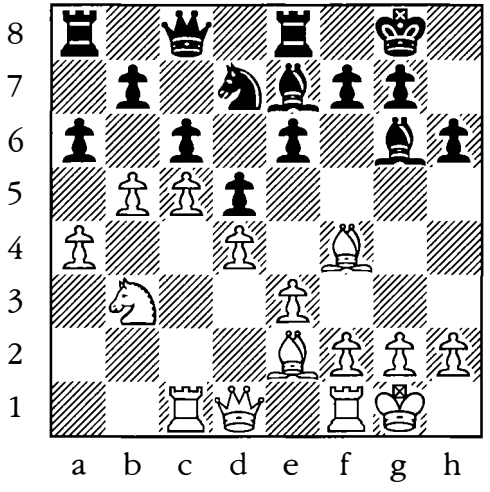
The ...♘e4 manoeuvre is critical for Black here. He is in a pretty cramped position and exchanges will greatly benefit him, especially exchanging the knights as they were fairly redundant here – fighting for the same squares on f6 and e4.

Now Black must continue quickly to open the centre with moves like ...♗f6, ...♖e8 and ...e5.



Position after 14...♘e4!

15 ♘xe4 ♗xe4 16 ♘d2 ♗g6 17 ♘b3 ♖e8 18 b5



Position after 18 b5

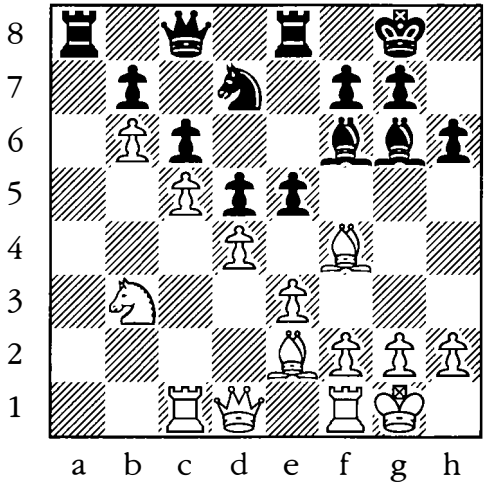
Although White is first to achieve a breakthrough, things are not as bad as they may appear for Black. He has much less space but his position is very solid and his pawn structure is well-connected and difficult to attack.

The key for Black to maintain the balance is to play for ...e5!

18...axb5

Against b5, Black should capture with the a6-pawn to open the a-file for his rook.

19 axb5 ♗f6 20 b6 e5!



Position after 20...e5!

White has snatched a lot of space on the queenside, but after the central break 20...e5! Black is doing just fine. Black can continue with play on the a-file via ...♖a3 and ...♕a8, by piling up on White's d4-pawn with ...exd4 and ...♖e8, or by pushing ...e5-e4 followed by a kingside attack with ...f7-f5-f4, etc.

This game excerpt follows a very important principle in chess:

If your opponent attacks on the flank, you should counterattack in the centre!

Chapter Four
Understanding Positional Play

Developing Intuition in Chess

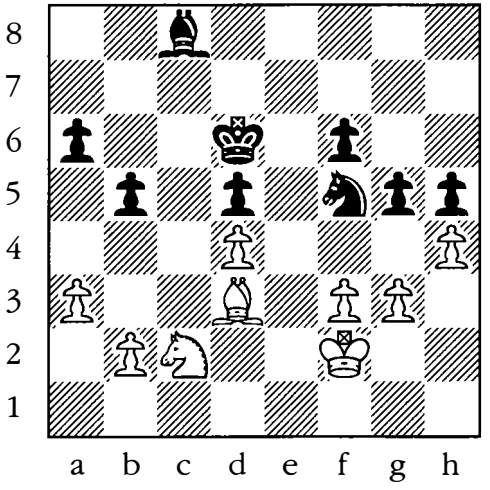
Chess players can begin to develop intuition in chess through two principal practices. The first way to improve your chess intuition is through basic pattern recognition. This primarily occurs through experience; for example, if you have studied/played the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian Defence, you will be very wary of allowing White to occupy the critical d5-square with a piece. Just as Kobe Bryant has trained his muscles to take jump-shots on the basketball court, so can the brain develop a parallel type of muscle memory that can be applied on the chess board. Pattern recognition allows the brain to save time and energy in nearly all cognitive functions, and this rule especially applies in chess where the number of patterns is limited by 32 pieces on 64 squares. Every game of chess that you play or study contributes to your pattern recognition and should thus further develop your chess intuition. The second method for developing intuition is achieved through targeted study.

Learn from World Champions

Pattern recognition is an effective practice for all chess players, but you cannot experience truly meaningful growth with respect to your chess intuition without working hard to improve your positional understanding of chess. I don't mean memorizing rules in chess – you actually need to understand the reasons behind the rules. For example, it's easy to recite why you don't want to have your pawns on the same colour as your bishop in the endgame. But it's much more effective to have put in hard work studying the reason behind this rule.

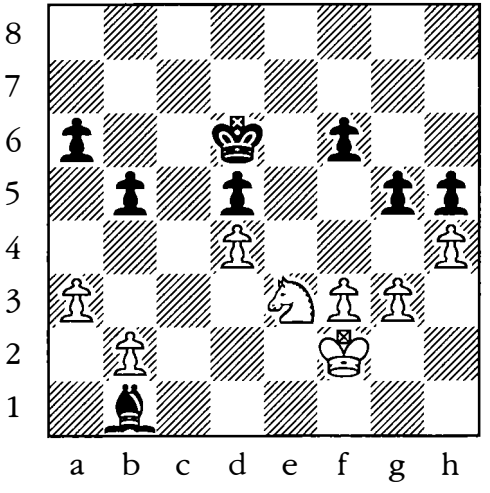
Let's take a look at a classic game from the 1984 World Chess Championship Match between Anatoly Karpov and Garry Kasparov. In this round-nine encounter,

Karpov perfectly demonstrated the power of his positional understanding and chess intuition by applying consistent pressure in the opening to achieve a dangerous initiative in the middlegame and subsequent endgame. Karpov's deep play left Kasparov constantly defending, resulting in the following incredible positional tactic:



Karpov vs. Kasparov: position after 43...g5

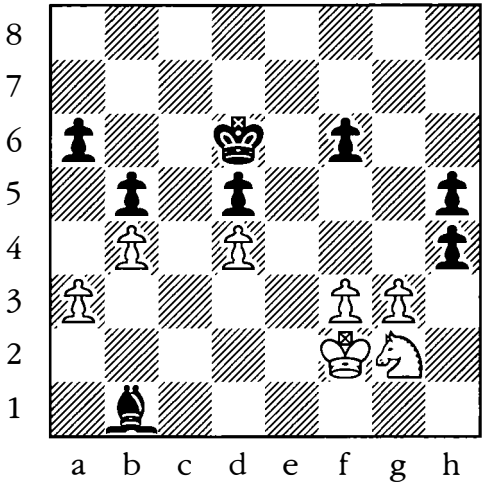
Here Karpov's chess intuition directed him to play:
44 ♗xf5! ♗xf5 45 ♘e3 ♗b1



Position after 45...♗b1

After 44 ♗xf5! Karpov has achieved a very large long-term positional advantage with a classic good knight vs. bad bishop scenario. In a position of material equality with very few pieces left on the board, Karpov proceeds by sacrificing a pawn to open a new front for his pieces to attack.

46 b4!? gxh4? 47 ♘g2!!



Position after 47 ♘g2!!

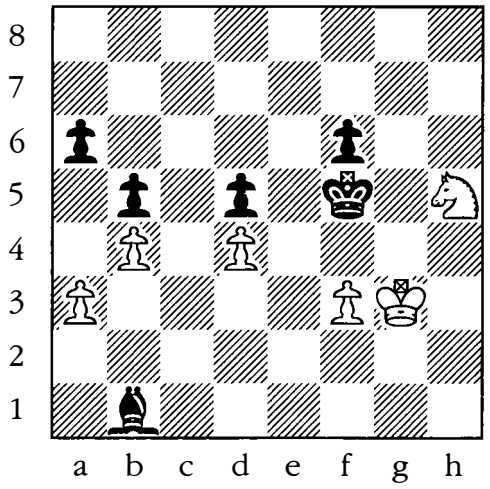
Without immense imagination and finely tuned chess intuition, there's no way you could even consider 47 ♘g2!!.

Karpov temporarily sacrifices a pawn to break open lines, as White is guaranteed to win the pawn back and advance with his king and knight to get behind Black's defences.

47...hxg3 48 ♔xg3 ♔e6 49 ♘f4+ ♔f5 50 ♘xh5

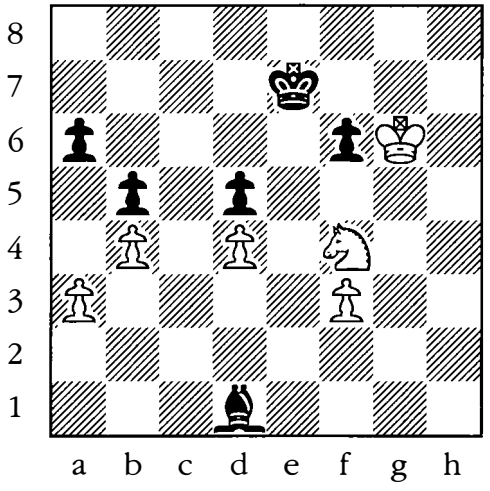
White regains the pawn, and his long-term positional advantage with his knight against Black's 'bad' light-squared bishop is very evident. Black's bishop is 'bad' because it is limited to the defence of Black's pawns and unable to participate actively in the position.

Meanwhile Karpov can manoeuvre his knight to constantly push Black's king back while advancing White's king deeper into Kasparov's position. Although drawing lines for Black have since been uncovered, it is an extremely difficult position to hold in practical play.



Position after 50 ♘xh5

50...♔e6 51 ♘f4+ ♔d6 52 ♔g4 ♗c2 53 ♔h5 ♗d1 54 ♔g6 ♔e7

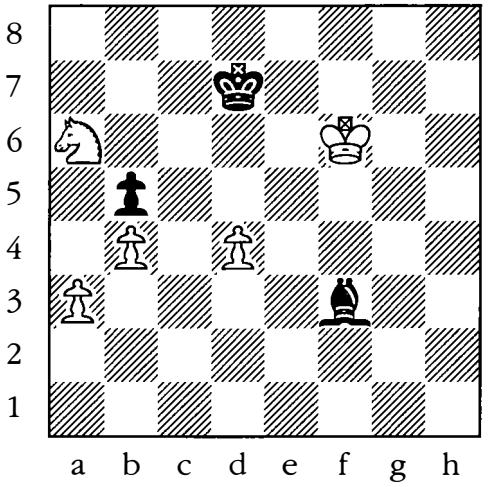


Position after 54...♔e7

Kasparov's main problem is that it is impossible to make progress with the black pieces. Karpov's powerful pawn sacrifice opened up critical lines on the kingside for White to bring his king behind Black's pawns. This is an excellent ex-

ample of why you don't want to have your bishop on the same colour as your pawns in the endgame! Notice how Black's bishop is only able to attack White's f3-pawn, while White's knight is able to manoeuvre throughout the entire board and can attack every one of Black's fixed pawns.

55 ♘xd5+ ♔e6 56 ♘c7+ ♔d7 57 ♘xa6 ♗xf3 58 ♔xf6

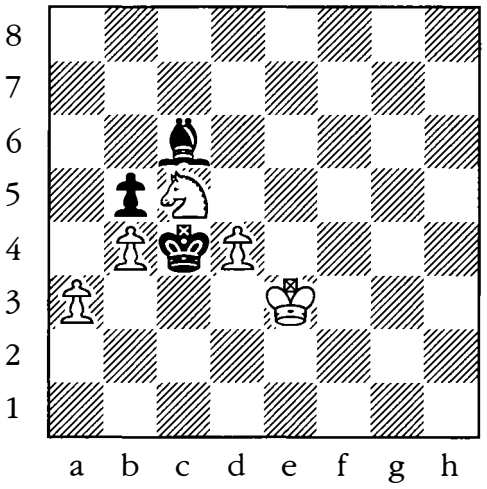


Position after 58 ♔xf6

After decisively breaking through with his king on the kingside and his knight on the queenside, White is now up two pawns and retains the huge advantage of knight vs. bad bishop. Karpov's patient technique is highly instructive as he massages Black's weakened position without permitting Black any chances for counterplay or complication.

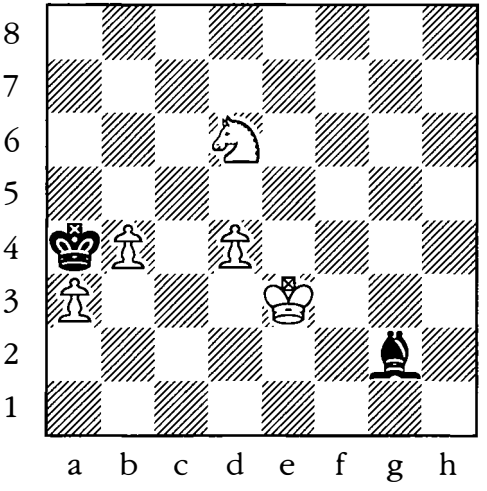
58...♔d6 59 ♔f5 ♔d5 60 ♔f4 ♗h1 61 ♔e3 ♔c4 62 ♘c5 ♗c6

Karpov's play in this positional masterpiece perfectly illustrates one of the most important principles in the endgame – patience! He brought his king backwards to e3 to consolidate his position and defend the d4-pawn. The next step to converting the full point will be to use his knight to help push the d-pawn towards promotion. Kasparov attempts to defend actively but the material deficit of two pawns is simply too much to overcome.



Position after 62...♗c6

63 ♘d3 ♗g2 64 ♘e5+ ♔c3 65 ♘g6 ♔c4 66 ♘e7 ♗b7 67 ♘f5 ♗g2 68 ♘d6+ ♔b3 69 ♘xb5 ♔a4 70 ♘d6 Black resigned (1-0)



Final Position after 70 ♘d6 – Black resigned

After manoeuvring his knight to control critical light squares and threaten decisive forks, Karpov finally pushed forward for the win. This endgame is highly in-

structive for the incredible pawn sacrifice on 47 ♘g2!! and the subsequent precise endgame technique that Karpov is so well known for.

The above example perfectly illustrates why it is so critical to acknowledge the importance of deep, positional understanding and a strong chess intuition. This same concept can be applied to any stage or facet of the game, such as avoiding opening the position while your king is in the centre or automatically looking for combinations based on your opponent's unprotected pieces.

Developing your own chess intuition will improve the very backbone of your game, opening your eyes to new ideas for effective play that you would not have previously considered.

The Power of Fluid Coordination

One of the most common errors among beginner chess players is the tendency to focus exclusively on playing with a narrow set of pieces. For example, many younger players become easily enamoured with the knight and can't stop themselves from hopping all over the board to their own detriment. Beginner chess players are also naturally prone to place excessive influence on the role of pawns in the game, getting carried away with superficial pawn attacks that just never seem to get there.

The role of active piece-play in chess should never be underestimated; however, using your pieces to haphazardly blanket the board is not going to accomplish much of anything. *Coordinating your pieces into a cohesive unit that is targeted at a specific focal point (usually one square or a very narrow area) will allow you to concentrate your energy for maximal results.* While chess is entirely an individual sport, one-on-one, there is a very strong team element between your pieces to consider as *you simply can't play your best chess without utilizing all of your pieces via a holistically organized plan and objective.*

Organize Your Pieces into a Cohesive Attacking Force

'The strength of the team is each individual member... the strength of each member is the team.' – Coach Phil Jackson

Phil Jackson knows a thing or two about winning, owning no less than 13 NBA Championship Rings (11 as a coach, 2 as a player). Jackson's unparalleled success as a coach is attributed to his uncanny ability to make his players work as a cohesive unit. With two different teams in different eras (the Chicago Bulls and the Los Angeles Lakers), Jackson was able to influence two of the game's best players ever

– Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant – to shed aside the desire for individual accolades and instead put the demands and goals of the team at the forefront. And you should do exactly the same thing when you play chess!

Don't overemphasize one piece's importance due to an unnecessary bias – instead try to achieve the type of absolute objectivity seen in the play of the world's best. *Moulding your pieces on the chessboard into an organized team will enable you to feel the power of the big picture in chess* – instead of focusing on small portions of the board involving limited pieces and manoeuvres, aim to enhance your vision by understanding the overall demands of the position, so that you can react optimally with a completely cohesive plan.

> *'Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.'*
> Michael Jordan

Applying Poker Psychology to Chess

I consider poker to be very similar to chess as both sports require absolute levels of focus, objectivity and strategy to succeed. The main difference between chess and poker is the luck factor. There is absolutely no element of luck in chess; there are only good moves. After someone loses a chess game they might say the opponent got lucky, but what they really mean is that they played sub-optimally and did not capitalize on the mistakes of the opponent. In chess, a player makes his own luck by consistently making good moves. On the other hand in poker, the element of luck is a very real thing. While a poker player may consistently make good bets and decisions, he might win many inconsequential hands and lose a few big hands where he is statistically favoured – but I guess that's why they call it gambling! Let's take a look at the main psychological factors that influence the games of poker and chess in very similar ways.

Maintain Objectivity

This is an incredibly important factor in building a strong poker or chess psychology. Whether you have just taken a bad beat in a big hand or fallen victim to a tactic you hadn't even considered, *it is critical to stay calm and maintain objectivity in your decision-making process.* When the situation feels hopeless and out of control, this is a great time to realize you're not thinking straight and get up for a glass of water and a quick walk around the room to clear your thoughts. The ability to fight back from a bad position is a clear indicator of a strong psychology in chess or poker.

Consistent Pressure

Spectators often wonder how grandmasters create fantastic tactics seemingly out of nowhere, or how poker pros can dance on the edge of disaster with continued success by making huge bluffs. The short answer is consistent pressure. By continually pressuring opponents with new threats, you force your opponent into solving new problems at every turn. Consistent pressure can wear down even the most determined player, generating unforced errors at an alarming rate. *Amazing tactics or bluffs do not appear out of thin air; they are the direct result of consistent pressure.*

All-In

In chess and poker, often a player is forced to make a decisive move. Whether you're extremely pot-committed or you have pushed an attack as far as it can go without large material sacrifices, you must not hesitate to pull the trigger. Going all-in in poker requires the exact same mentality as sacrificing a piece in chess – it is almost certain that, when the dust clears, there will be a decisive result – you win or you lose. But if you shy away from these decisive moments and opt for quieter continuations, it will very negatively affect the entire complexion of your game. So don't be afraid to go all-in and all-out for the win!

Not Winning Won Positions?

This is a common problem that has plagued chess players since the game was invented. There is nothing more frustrating than playing the opening very well, continuing to press in the middlegame, and watching the win slip through your fingers in the endgame. After you shake hands with your weasel opponent who got 'lucky' enough to slip away with a draw from such a terrible position, you can't stop beating yourself up for not finishing the drill. Many sore not-winners will pathetically walk out of the tournament hall in a zombie-like daze, thinking: *'Where did it all go wrong?'*

How to Choose the Right Plan

There are essentially two ways to evaluate this situation. Let's start with the scientific, objective approach. Maybe you simply chose the wrong plan? If you are in a better position, there are usually two ways to convert this advantage to a full point. You can continue building your position with extremely aggressive intentions, eventually going all-out for a psychotic sacrifice to checkmate your opponent's king and destroy his will to continue playing chess. This is my instinctive inclination, although it's not always the best. Sometimes you need to consolidate

that extra pawn and coordinate your pieces into a defensive crouch, with the intention of slowly creeping over the board while making strategic exchanges into a patiently won endgame. So identifying the reason for not capitalizing on a strong advantage can be that maybe you just chose the wrong plan for converting your advantage? It always helps to go over your games with a fine-tooth comb and figure out exactly where you made mistakes, so you don't perpetuate the same errors in the future.

Chess Psychology of Winning Won Positions

Identifying what the problem is does not always explain the reason or how to fix it. Sometimes, you have to look at the true source of your mistakes to understand them and achieve an effective solution. Chess psychology is extremely complicated due to the very nature of the game. You have to find that delicate balance between pressing hard to make the most of your advantage, while being careful not to overextend yourself and give the game back to your opponent. The most common reason for not winning won positions in chess is perfectly explained by former World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov:

'I've seen – both in myself and my competitors – how satisfaction can lead to a lack of vigilance, then to mistakes and missed opportunities.'

Developing Resourcefulness

There is no such thing as a 'sure thing' in chess. A game is not over until the clock has been stopped and hands have been shook. Comebacks in other sports like basketball and football are easy to spot, as you can't miss Eli Manning leading another fourth quarter comeback drive against the New England Patriots. But events can be a little more subtle on the chessboard. It's easy for your opponent to be lulled into a false sense of security and play inaccurately. This is exactly why you never want to give up until you are 100 percent sure there is absolutely no way you can salvage the game and play on.

Premature capitulation does not always involve blatant resignation – chess players will give up on a difficult position way before it is necessary due to a simple breakdown in mental resolve. It is imperative to continue fighting at all costs and make your opponent earn every ounce of the win, because that is exactly how you're going to save a lot of games that you thought were completely hopeless.

'It is rightly said that the most difficult thing in chess is winning a won position.'
– former World Chess Champion Vladimir Kramnik

In the 21st century, the value of a stubborn defence has skyrocketed as top players like Magnus Carlsen, Vassily Ivanchuk, Hikaru Nakamura and Nikita Vitiugov are setting an example via the incredibly high level of resourcefulness regularly seen in their games. *The most difficult chess to play involves defending a worse position, but if you can learn how to patiently repel your opponent's initiative and attentively wait for your best chance to launch a counterattack, your results are certain to improve.* The lesson is to never stop defending as actively and stubbornly as possible, no matter how hopeless your position looks because every chess game is rich in subtle chances for a last-minute comeback.

Avoid Initiating Exchanges

One of the most common mistakes among beginner chess players is the natural inclination towards making exchanges. It's almost like many beginner chess players hear voices in their head telling them, 'You must trade a lot of pieces to win.' Now I'm not trying to say you have to completely avoid trading pieces – however, it's very important to understand and apply the concept of maintaining and increasing pressure in a position. To be clear, when I say 'Initiate an exchange,' I mean that you are starting the trade of a piece without being forced to do so.

One of the main problems with initiating exchanges is that you are usually giving your opponent a free developing move with his recapture. Also, you are typically conceding space by allowing your opponent to dominate a square or area, instead of increasing the pressure by bringing in more pieces to attack a focal point and refusing to start trades. And last, but not least, there are strong underlying psychological considerations behind this rule. *By initiating exchanges, you are not only objectively giving up space, allowing your opponent to gain time in development with his recapture, and releasing pressure against your opponent's position – you are also psychologically capitulating and telling your opponent that you don't want to escalate the tension.*

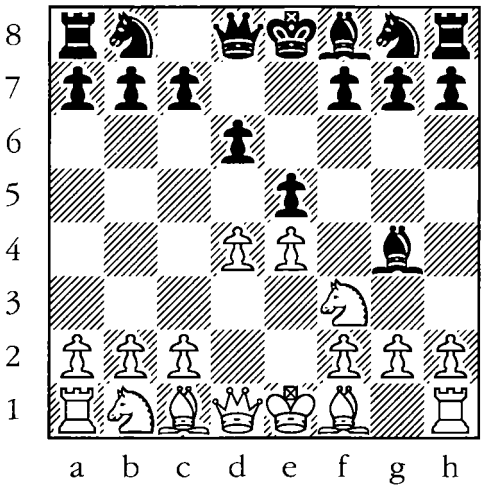
It's not like you should never trade pieces, but before you make the trade – ask yourself this question:

'Will this exchange benefit my position more than my opponent's?'

Let's return for a moment to Paul Morphy's epic game against Duke Karl and Count Isouard, where there was a very clear illustration of the bad effects of initiating exchanges:

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 ♗g4

Here we have temporary equality as both sides have each developed two pawns and one minor piece. However, with Morphy's next move, he forces Black to initiate an exchange and essentially give White an extra developing move for free.

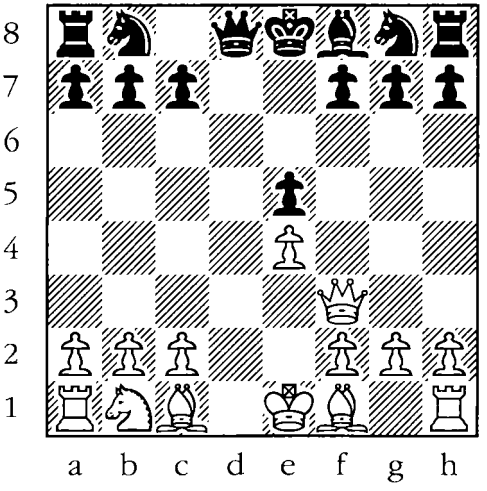


Position after 3...♗g4

4 dxe5 ♗xf3

If 4...dxe5? then 5 ♕xd8+ ♔xd8 6 ♘xe5 – White wins a pawn and maintains the initiative.

5 ♕xf3 dxe5



Position after 5...dxe5

We can clearly see the effects of Black initiating the exchange with a poorly thought-out plan involving 3...♗g4 and 4...♗xf3. Now White is up an extra move in development, and Morphy's subsequent hyper-aggressive play capitalized on this advantage and led to a deserved win.

This is a very clear elementary example of why you don't want to initiate exchanges; however, this principle should not be underestimated. Consciously avoiding the initiation of exchanges will definitely help your game improve, as you will see the concrete effects on the board (as in the above game), as well as the psychological effects of maintaining and increasing pressure against your opponent instead of timidly wanting to reduce the tension.

Chess Basics: Material Realities

One of the most difficult concepts to learn in chess is the flexibility of material worth. There are three basic elements to evaluate in a position: material, position and time – however, for the purpose of general study, you typically only need to worry about the material and the position. Accurately leveraging the value of certain pieces against positional considerations is so tough because both aspects are constantly changing with every move. It can be easy to become mesmerized by the wild tactical complications and materialistic concerns, only to emerge from the complications with a horrible, enduring positional disadvantage.

The ability to maintain absolute equilibrium and pure objectivity is the mark of a strong chess player, attentively in tune with the constantly changing demands of the position – both material and positional.

As material values can be easily quantified, let's take a look at a basic set of guidelines to give you some concrete numbers for chess pieces that can serve as an initial base for your material evaluations.

Point Values

9 = Queen
5 = Rook
3 = Bishop
3 = Knight *(2.5 according to Fischer)*
1 = Pawn

The above point values are an excellent guide to work with; however, you have to remember that these values are different in every position. For example, in some positions a bishop, knight, and pawn (7 points) could be better than a queen (9 points). Exchange sacrifices can be especially effective in changing the dynam-

tics of a position, even though the material balance would tend to favour the side with the rook (5 points) over the side with a minor piece and a pawn (4 points).

There are also general positional maxims that are more easily understood. For example, Bobby Fischer believed that a bishop was worth more than a knight, as the bishop's long-range power can be very powerful in a simultaneous attack and defence, as well as in most endgames. Another excellent general principle is that bishops are better than knights in open positions; however, if the centre is closed and the pawn structure is locked – then the knight's limited mobility will no longer be a factor, and the knight's ability to hit all of the squares on the board (not just one colour) will almost guarantee it to be stronger than the bishop.

Evaluating Material vs. Positional Demands

There are always exceptions to general rules and principles in chess, which is exactly what is so fascinating about the game. There are no absolute dogmas in chess, as every rule has room for interpretation and exception. Although there are a fixed number of 32 total pieces on the board, a near infinite number of possibilities exist. *Real improvement in chess is centred around hard work towards deeper understanding, avoiding direct memorization of rules.* Sayings like 'a knight on the rim is dim' are correct *most* of the time; however, in some circumstances violating this basic principle could result in strong positional or material gain. *True improvement in chess involves broadening your flexibility with respect to the application of rules, and always being attentive to the constantly changing values of material and positional dynamics.*

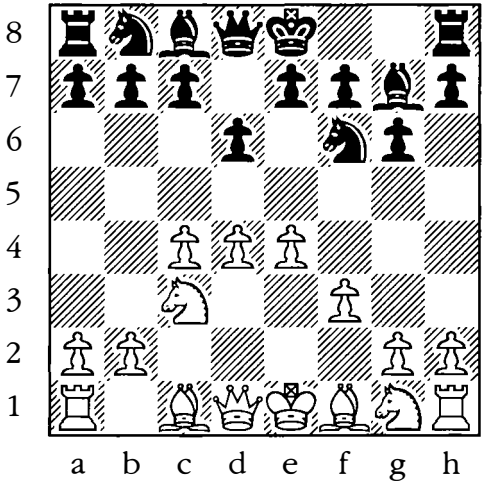
Dynamic Imbalances: Material vs. Position

Dynamic imbalances are what separate chess from math because equations in chess are always multi-dimensional. In a practical chess game, you must always evaluate a position with respect to material, positional and temporal considerations. When two players each strive to create maximum tension on the board and refuse to capitulate in any form, imbalances are guaranteed to appear.
One player may play aggressively and sacrifice a pawn (**material**) to gain compensation by seizing the initiative (**positional**) and force his opponent to consume a good deal of **time** to evaluate the resulting complications. While the pawn sacrifice is the most common type of material imbalance to arise, it is also possible to create dynamic tension with many other types of sacrifices or exchanges.

In the following game between two chess legends we will examine a very unique type of material imbalance involving two minor pieces and two pawns for a queen.

White: Boris Spassky
Black: David Bronstein
Amsterdam/Leeuwarden 1956
King's Indian Defence

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 ♗g7 4 e4 d6 5 f3

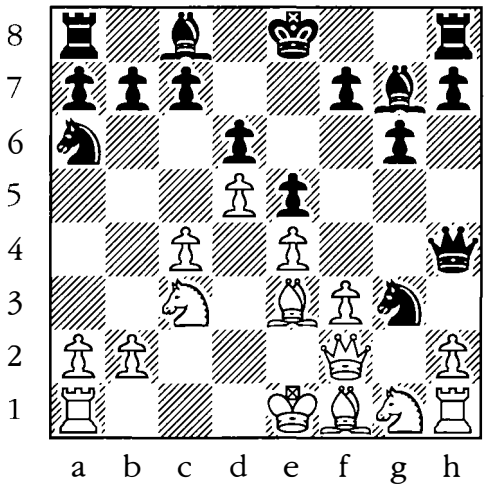


Position after 5 f3

With 5 f3 we have arrived at the Sämisch Variation of the King's Indian Defence, where White is explicitly declaring his intentions to play on the light squares and Black will normally seek counterplay on the dark squares with ...e5 or ...c5.

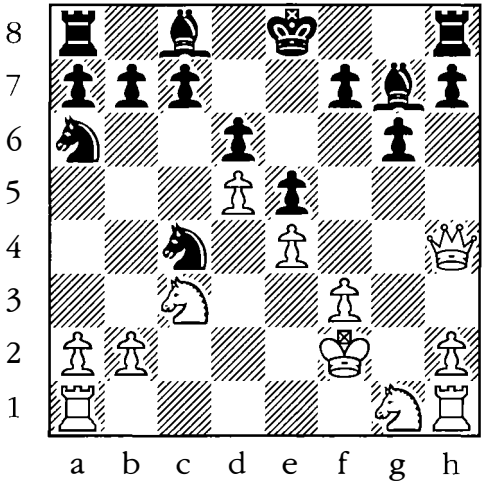
5...e5 6 d5 ♘h5 7 ♗e3 ♘a6 8 ♕d2 ♕h4+ 9 g3 ♘xg3 10 ♕f2

The Bronstein Variation of the Sämisch Variation of the King's Indian Defence features an extremely creative queen sacrifice that is very difficult to react to. Black sacrifices his queen (worth 9 points) for two bishops and two pawns (worth a total of 8 points). A rare dynamic imbalance results:



Position after 10 ♕f2

10...♘xf1 11 ♕xh4 ♘xe3 12 ♔f2 ♘xc4



Position after 12...♘xc4

Black emerges from the complications with an interesting initiative in the centre and kingside. He will no doubt manoeuvre to activate his knights towards the centre while trying to exploit White's exposed king with a future ...f5 break.

Not only does this combination immediately grant Black compensation for the sacrificed material in the form of a strong initiative, this rapid change in the underlying dynamics of the position also will certainly benefit Black more on a psychological level, as Black should be more prepared than his opponent to enter this line.

Although Bronstein proceeded to lose this game in the face of an inspired plan by Spassky, this queen sacrifice is still seen in today's game – specifically due to the nature of the exceptional dynamic imbalances this queen sacrifice creates.

The Exchange Sacrifice

So now that we know how awesome it is to create dynamic imbalances, we still need to acknowledge that there is an appropriate 'time and place' to mix it up with a sacrifice. One of the most frequent sacrifices in chess is the 'exchange sacrifice' (rook for bishop or knight) – an absolute classic sac that can be personified in many different forms. For example, Tigran Petrosian was famous for defensively sacrificing the exchange to construct an impregnable defensive fortress.

However, the exchange sac is more commonly seen in attempts to rapidly attack and throw the opponent off balance. There is also the long-term positional exchange sac, with the objective of creating a lasting positional imbalance and, typically, long-term damage against the opponent's pawn structure. The exchange sacrifice can be a deadly tool in the hands of any type of player (tactical, positional, etc.); however, it is very important to understand the conditions that are favourable for this type of sacrifice.

When to Sac the Exchange

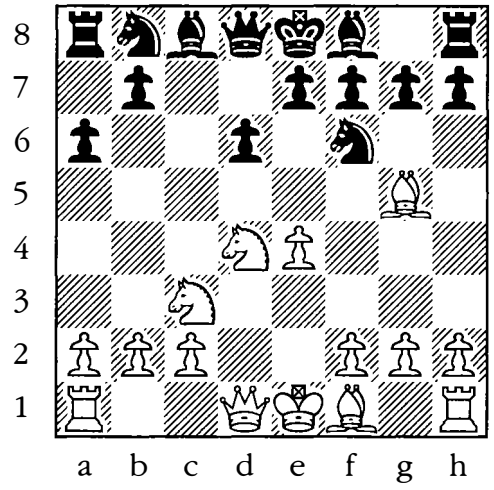
As exchange sacs can occur in such a variety of different settings, there are no concrete rules to know when an exchange sac is appropriate. You primarily have to rely on positional understanding and intuition to sense an appropriate exchange sac; however, there are a few basic factors that can point you in the right direction. One such basic rule is that sacrifices almost always occur from the side with a superior position, since if you are already pressuring your opponent, the 'ripple effect' of a sacrifice can resonate throughout an already nervous defence.

The exchange sac can be especially effective in helping you seize the initiative against an unsuspecting opponent who may have simply missed the concept that you can sacrifice in a given position. Lastly, the exchange sac can have enduring effects by permanently destroying the fluidity of your opponent's pawn structure and giving you static weaknesses to attack.

In the following game, we're going to examine a classic exchange sacrifice by Bobby Fischer in the Sicilian Najdorf that leaves White completely devastated.

White: Walter Ader Hausman
Black: Bobby Fischer
Santiago 1959
Sicilian Defence

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗g5

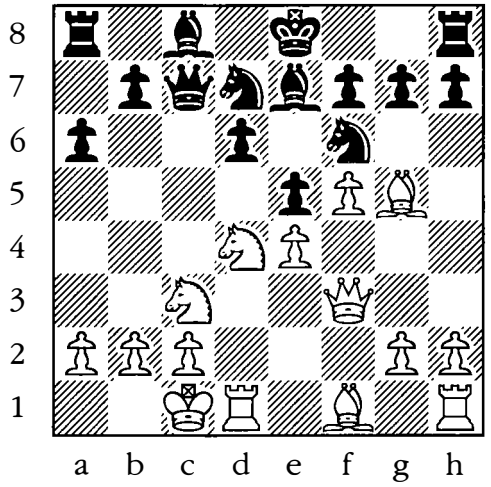


Position after 6 ♗g5

We have reached the complicated 6 ♗g5 line of the Sicilian Najdorf. Black will normally aim to create counterplay against White's centre by achieving pressure on the half-open c-file and striving for the thematic breaks ...b5 and ...d5.

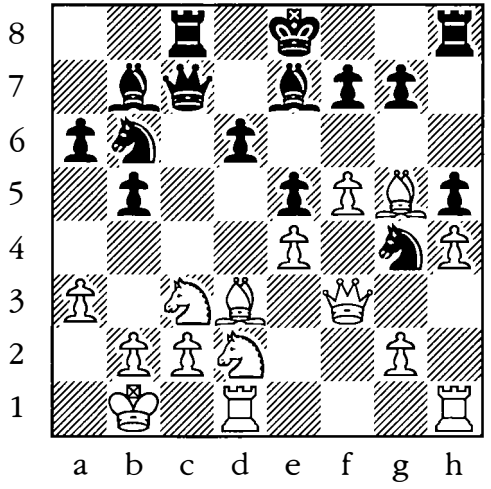
6...e6 7 f4 ♗e7 8 ♕f3 ♕c7 9 0-0-0 ♘bd7 10 f5 e5

White forces Black to permanently weaken the d5-square, although by doing so White has committed himself as he is no longer able to force the centre open with e4-e5.



Position after 10...e5

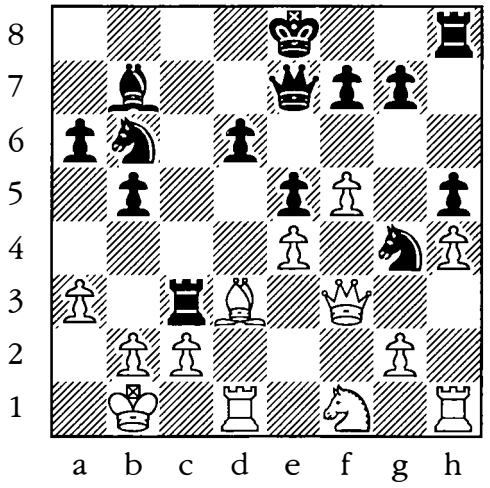
11 ♘b3 b5 12 a3 ♗b7 13 h4 ♖c8 14 ♗d3 h5 15 ♔b1 ♘b6 16 ♘d2 ♘g4!



Position after 16...♘g4!

After completing his development on the queenside and creating pressure on the half-open c-file, Fischer exchanges his 'bad' bishop on e7 and slides his queen out of the way of his rook on c8.

17 ♗xe7 ♕xe7 18 ♘f1 ♖xc3!



Position after 18...♖xc3!

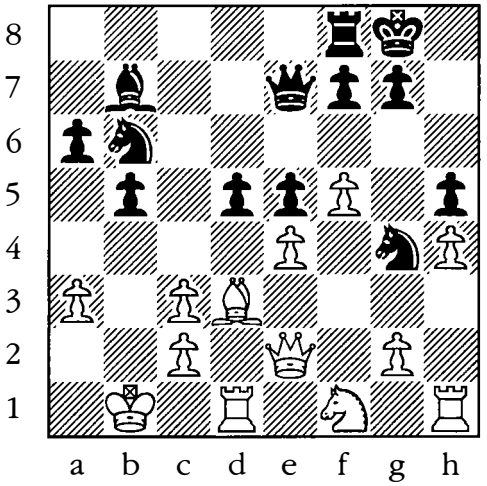
Fischer sacrifices the exchange to permanently damage the pawn cover in front of White's king. This was a great opportunity to do so as White had just embarked on a time-consuming manoeuvre with his knight going backwards to f1 (eventually trying to land the knight from f1-e3-d5).

This type of exchange sac on c3 is frequently seen in many variations of the Sicilian Defence, and is especially effective when White has pushed his pawn to a3 as this pawn will often become a chronic weakness in addition to the doubled c-pawns. Black's knight on b6 can now torture White's queenside by threatening ...♘c4 or ...♘a4 at any moment.

To complement his lasting positional pressure on White's weak queenside pawns, Fischer has also achieved a very dangerous attack, and with subsequent play we can truly feel the 'ripple effect' of the sacrifice as White's entire position is greatly affected.

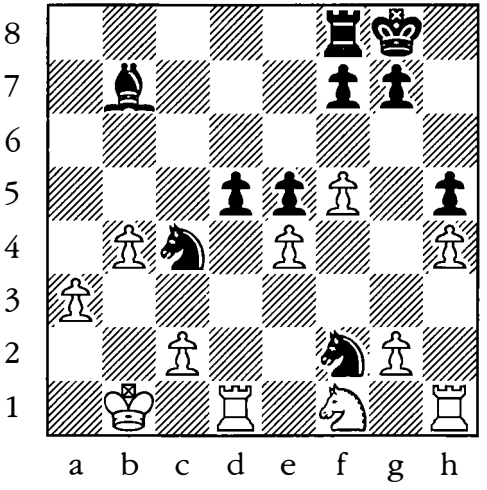
19 bxc3 d5! 20 ♕e2 0-0!

With 19...d5! Fischer opened up his queen to attack on the f8-a3 diagonal while simultaneously introducing a mountain of pressure against White's loose centre. White was planning on responding to 20...♘a4? with 21 ♗xb5+! – crippling Black's attack. Fischer instead plays 20...0-0, preventing any type of cheap tactics and also renewing the threat of ...♘a4 and ...♕xa3.



Position after 20...0-0!

21 ♗xb5 axb5 22 ♕xb5 ♘c4 23 ♕b4 ♕xb4 24 cxb4 ♘f2



Position after 24...♘f2

White was forced to sacrifice a piece with 21 ♗xb5 to try to distract Black from achieving a winning attack against White's exposed king. Fischer went on to win the game easily:

25 ♘g3 ♘xa3+ 26 ♔b2 ♘c4+ 27 ♔b3 ♘e3 28 ♖d2 ♘xh1 29 ♘xh1 dxe4 30 ♘g3 ♗d5+ 31 ♔a4 ♖a8+ 32 ♔b5 ♖b8+ 33 ♔c5 ♖c8+ 34 ♔d6 ♘c4+ 35 ♔d7 ♘xd2 36 ♕xc8 ♗c4 0–1

This game perfectly illustrates how a well-planned and well-timed exchange sacrifice can instantly destroy your opponent's defences. First, Fischer developed energetically and established good piece-play against White's centre. Then, Fischer manoeuvred to open his rook on the c-file in a very natural way. And finally, Fischer blasted open White's exposed king with the exchange sac 18...♖xc3 to achieve a winning attack against White's overextended and uncoordinated pieces.

Long-Term Strategy

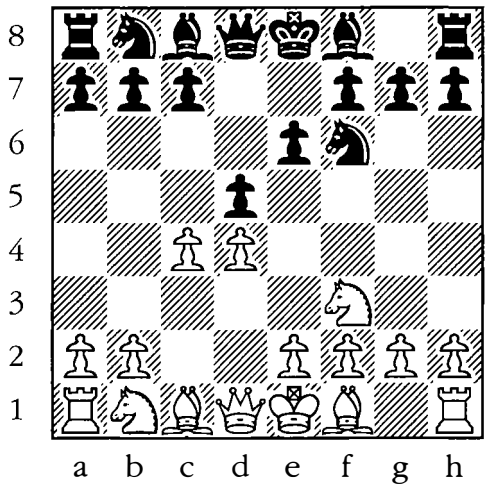
Pressure is the basic element that separates strong chess players from weak players. From the very first moves, strong players strive to place immediate and maximum pressure on their opponents. This pressure can be both tactical and positional, and if you look at the games of strong grandmasters you will find that the best players are able to combine short-term tactical threats with long-term positional goals and strategy. Bobby Fischer's games demonstrate this concept extremely well, as the former World Champion developed a formula to crush other grandmasters by achieving rapid pressure in the opening and employing forcing 3-4 move tactics to convert this pressure into a long-term positional advantage. Pressure alone can be countered easily; however, consistent pressure combined with cohesive, long-term strategy is very difficult to defend.

To concretely demonstrate how to combine consistent pressure with deep, long-term plans, let's dissect a classic example from the 1972 World Chess Championship Match between Bobby Fischer and Boris Spassky.

White: Bobby Fischer
Black: Boris Spassky
World Championship (Game 6), Reykjavik 1972
Queen's Gambit Declined

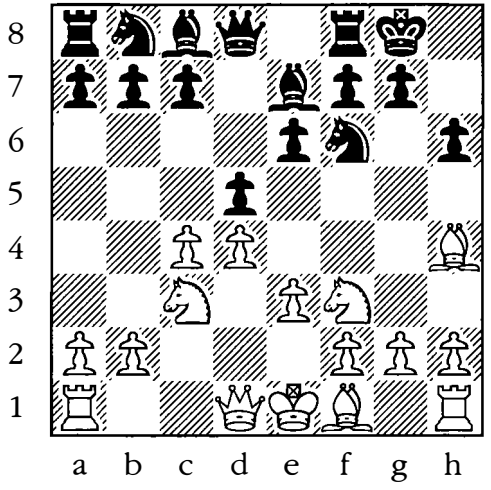
1 c4 e6 2 ♘f3 d5 3 d4 ♘f6

Both sides strive to control the centre and develop their minor pieces.



Position after 3...♘f6

4 ♘c3 ♗e7 5 ♗g5 0-0 6 e3 h6 7 ♗h4

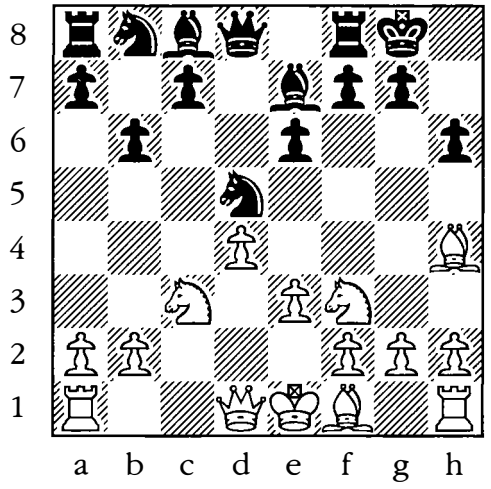


Position after 7 ♗h4

Black has employed a flexible set-up with rapid kingside castling. With 6...h6, Spassky forced Fischer to make a decision with his bishop – either to take the knight with 7 ♗xf6 which would give White an initiative in the short-term but would also give the long-term advantage of the two bishops to Black; or to main-

:ain the tension (and the bishop pair!) by retreating with 7 ♗h4.

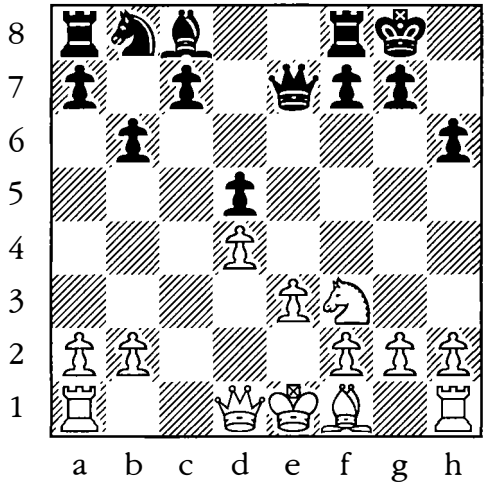
7...b6 8 cxd5 ♘xd5



Position after 8...♘xd5

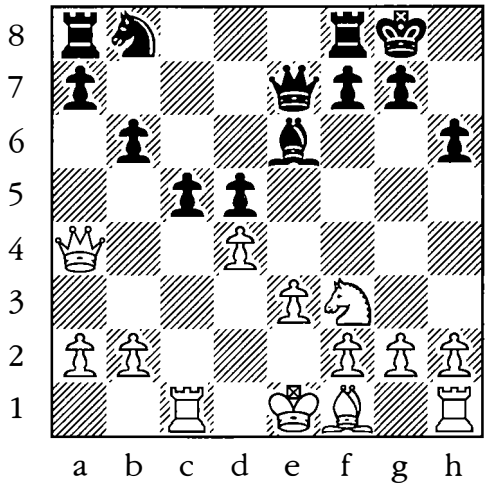
Fischer reacted to 7...b6 with 8 cxd5 to create 'loose' pawns in Black's position in the centre. Although White is initiating exchanges here, he has a very concrete reason for doing so: to create permanent weaknesses in Black's pawn structure.

9 ♗xe7 ♕xe7 10 ♘xd5 exd5



Position after 10...exd5

After this series of exchanges, we can see that Black's pawn structure could be compromised in the long term. White needs to play accurately in the near future to achieve a bind on Black's pawns; however, if White does succeed in restricting the mobility of Black's central pawns, he will be guaranteed long-term pressure.
11 ♖c1 ♗e6 12 ♕a4 c5



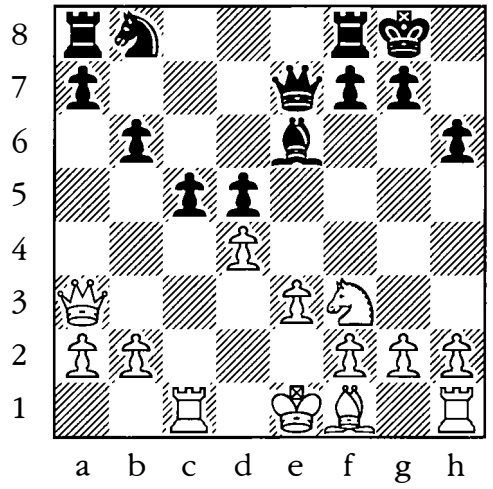
Position after 12...c5

With 11 ♖c1 Fischer began to place pressure on the half-open c-file, and with 12 ♕a4, it had become very difficult for Black to develop his knight on b8 and connect his rooks.

Although just a few moves ago the position looked completely equal, Fischer is mounting subtle positional pressure by playing very energetically to restrict Black's activity on the queenside.

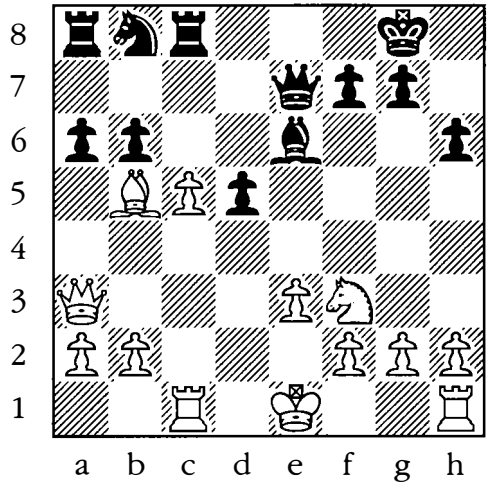
13 ♕a3!

Fischer's goal in the opening was to achieve a solid position with long-term positional pressure and without weaknesses. Unless Black's pawns on c5 and d5 can manage to become mobile and dynamic, they will be static/permanent weaknesses that Black will have to defend throughout the rest of the game. Also, the pin and pressure on Black's c5-pawn will require constant attention from Spassky.



Position after 13 ♕a3!

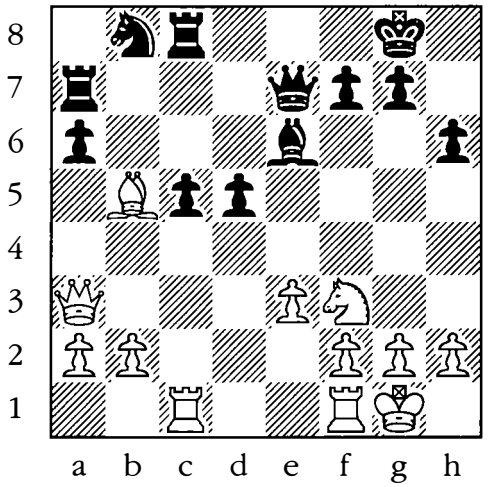
13...♖c8 14 ♗b5 a6 15 dxc5!



Position after 15 dxc5!

The a6-pawn is pinned, so Fischer leaves his bishop on b5 where it hinders the development of Black's knight on b8.

16 0-0 ♖a7

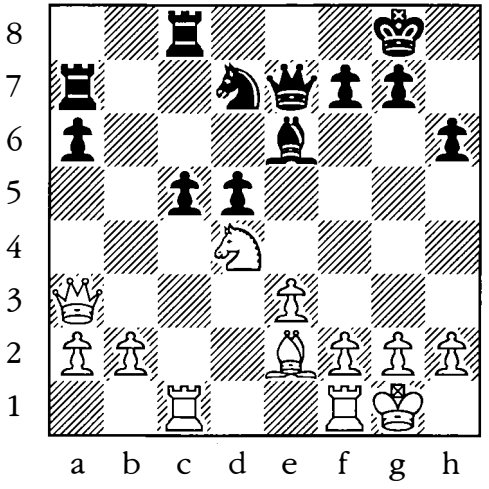


Position after 16...♖a7

Spassky capitulates, placing his rook awkwardly on a7 to push White's bishop back.

By enticing Black to weaken his a-pawn with 14...a6 and to weaken the position of his rook with 16...♖a7, Fischer has greatly strengthened his positional initiative against Black's centre.

17 ♗e2 ♘d7 18 ♘d4!

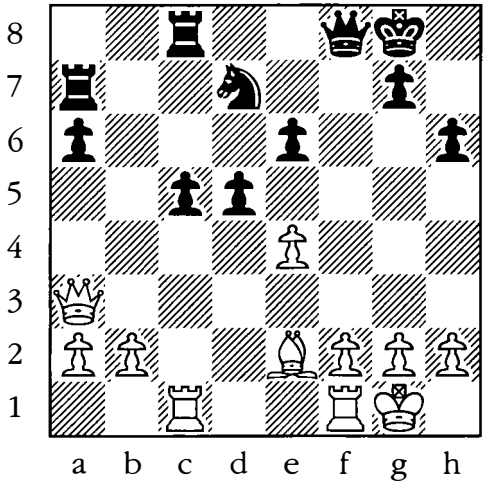


Position after 18 ♘d4!

18 ♘d4! is a perfect example of the 'transformation of advantages' concept. *White is transforming positional pressure against Black's c5- and d5-pawns into a long-term minor-piece advantage, with his soon-to-be powerful light-squared bishop against Black's knight.*

After the ensuing 19 ♘xe6, Fischer will attempt to open the position rapidly to capitalize on the bishop vs. knight minor piece imbalance. (Bishops are much more effective than knights in open positions. On the flipside, knights are much more effective than bishops in closed positions.)

18...♕f8 19 ♘xe6 fxe6 20 e4!

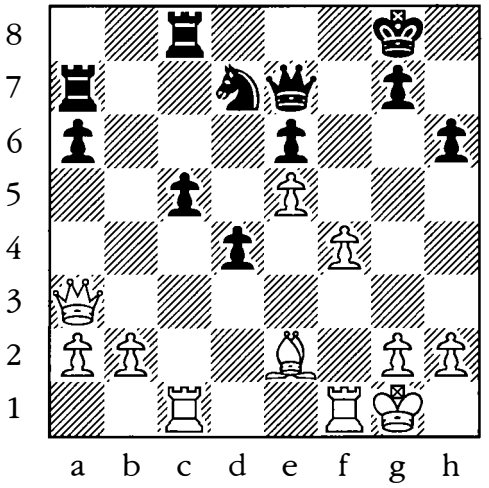


Position after 20 e4!

Fischer acts quickly to 'fix' Black's pawns and prevent them from mobilizing. *Not only is White trying to fix Black's pawns and open the position for his bishop, he is gaining space in the centre to facilitate a kingside attack.*

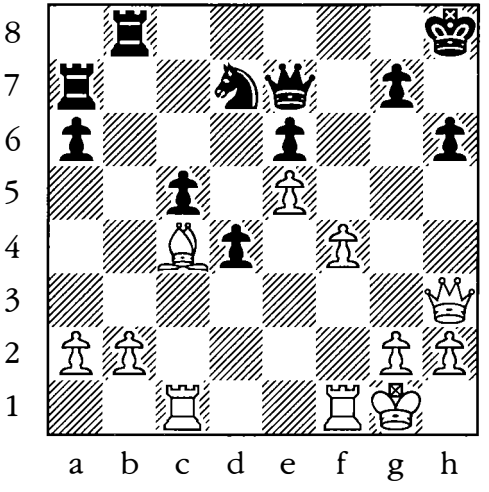
If Black captures the pawn with 20...dxe4, White will surely win this pawn back and obtain a great position due to Black's shattered pawn structure. Black's position is becoming increasingly difficult as Fischer is escalating the tension and creating new positional and tactical threats with every move.

20...d4 21 f4! ♕e7 22 e5!



Position after 22 e5!

With his last few moves, Fischer has immobilized Black's central pawns and changed the nature of the long-term pawn structure – placing his pawns on dark squares so that his light-squared bishop will be able to work with them and influence play on both wings. Black's only chance is to centralize his knight and try to activate his central pawns; however, White never relinquishes the initiative.
22...♖b8 23 ♗c4 ♔h8 24 ♕h3!



Position after 24 ♕h3!

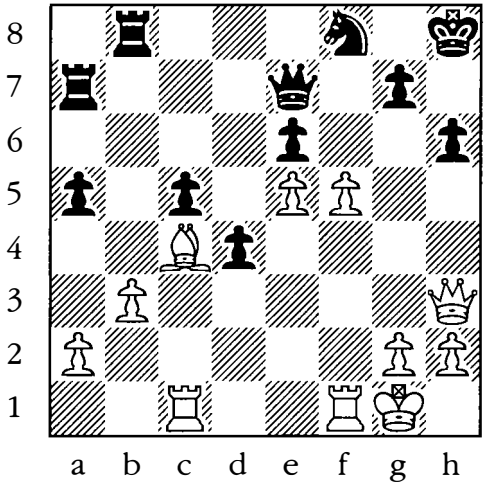
White has done an excellent job of playing prophylactically, to prevent any counterplay from his opponent. With 24 ♕h3! Fischer starts to step up the pressure and move his attack forward at an incredible pace.

If Black tries to obtain activity with 24...♖xb2, he will lose his e6-pawn – further opening the position for White's bishop and giving White a pair of dangerous pawns on e5 and f4 to push forward. Even so, this was Black's best chance as he would have at least achieved some counterplay.

Instead, the plan chosen by Spassky is very passive as Black just tries to 'hold on' in a defensive crouch without any activity whatsoever.

An active defence is always preferable to a passive defence, even if that may require certain material and/or positional concessions.

24...♘f8 25 b3 a5 26 f5



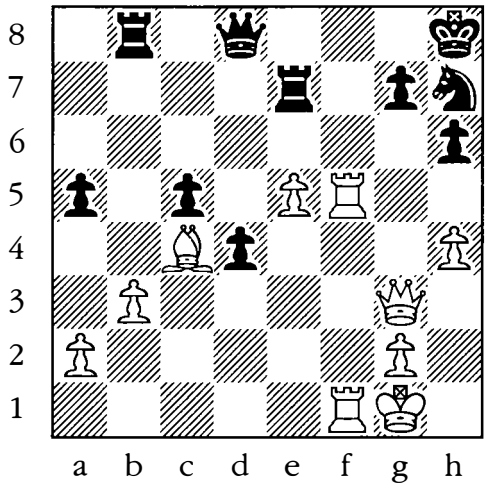
Position after 26 f5

Fischer plays directly, to open lines towards Black's king for the light-squared bishop and to create a passed e-pawn.

Without any chances for counterplay, Spassky is reduced to waiting and preparing for White's breakthrough.

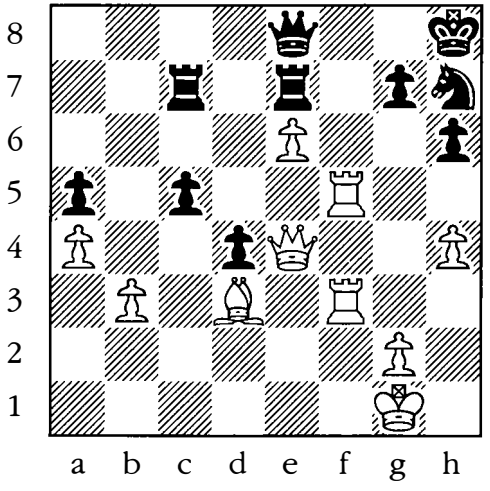
26...exf5 27 ♖xf5 ♘h7 28 ♖cf1 ♕d8 29 ♕g3 ♖e7 30 h4

With complete control over the f-file, White slowly begins improving all aspects of his position. Remember all the way back to the opening when Fischer began trying to create 'loose' pawns in Black's position on c5 and d5. This positional advantage is very apparent here, as Black's pawns are completely immobile and 'fixed'.



Position after 30 h4

Although White is ahead positionally, material is still equal and Fischer must continue accurately to convert his advantage. His technique is highly instructive. He first safeguards every possible flaw in his position and improves the placement of his pieces to the maximum before embarking upon the decisive breakthrough. **30...♖bb7 31 e6 ♖bc7 32 ♕e5 ♕e8 33 a4 ♕d8 34 ♖1f2 ♕e8 35 ♖2f3 ♕d8 36 ♗d3 ♕e8 37 ♕e4**



Position after 37 ♕e4

White has achieved perfect coordination and now threatens ♖f8+ and checkmate on h7 (e.g. 38 ♖f8+ ♕xf8 39 ♕xh7 mate, or 38 ♖f8+ ♘xf8 39 ♖xf8+ ♕xf8 40 ♕h7 mate).

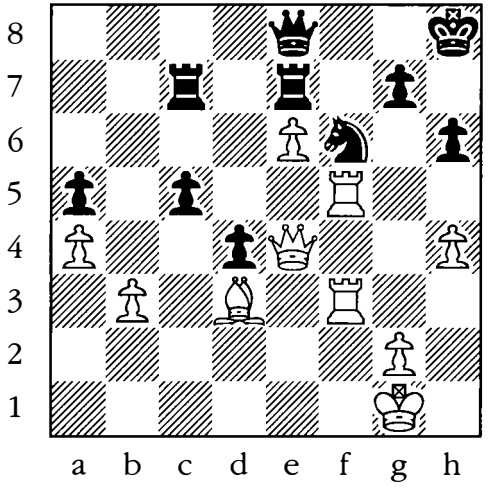
Let's take a look at exactly how Fischer effectively capitalized on the subtle positional pressure he achieved in the opening.

With 24 ♕h3, Fischer combined tactics with his long-term plan – transferring the queen to the kingside where it will be well placed to attack the black king (especially the weakened light-square complex h7, g6, f7, e6).

Fischer proceeded to open the position to increase the power of his bishop with 26 f5 – while also smoothly activating his rook and preparing to double on the f-file. Fischer's slow but solid play took no chances, and Spassky was forced to passively wait as there was no way to improve his position.

After 37 ♕e4, Fischer had improved his own position as much as possible. He was ready to blast open the position decisively, to tear Black's kingside open and end the game with a decisive attack.

37...♘f6



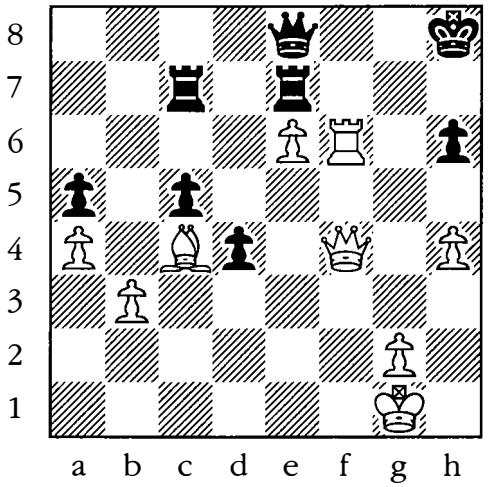
Position after 37...♘f6!

38 ♖xf6!

Fischer sacrifices the exchange to open lines against Black's king.

38...gxf6 39 ♖xf6 ♔g8 40 ♗c4 ♔h8 41 ♕f4 Black resigned (1-0)

Black resigned as he has no defence against 42 ♖f8+ and 42 ♖xh6+ ♖h7 43 ♕f6+ ♔g8 44 e7+.



Final Position after 41 ♕f4

Let's recap what happened in this game. Fischer first took the initiative with a series of aggressive manoeuvres on the queenside. Then he transformed this positional pressure into a favourable minor piece imbalance, bishop vs. knight. Subsequently, Fischer placed his pawns on dark squares, to complement the light-squared bishop. Finally, he opened the position to further emphasize the effectiveness of the unopposed light-squared bishop. Fischer's patient strategy enabled him to squeeze his opponent, as Spassky was simply unable to generate any sort of counterplay. *Fischer finished the game with perfect coordination – transforming his central control, strong bishop, passed pawn and superior activity into a decisive kingside attack.*

Basic Endgame Advice

Chess can be divided into three stages: the opening, middlegame, and endgame. However, the beginner player frequently dedicates the majority of studying time to opening play and tactics, ignoring the 'boring' positional themes associated with long-term strategy and endgame motifs. The importance of understanding endgame technique in chess should not be underestimated as the vast majority of games do not finish in the opening or middlegame.

Understanding critical concepts in the endgame will not only help you save draws in difficult positions, it will help you squeeze points out of materially balanced positions as well. A strong knowledge of fundamental endgame themes will

enable you to avoid theoretically unpleasant endgames, or subtly steer your games towards endgames where you know you will retain strong winning chances.

It is all too common that chess players of all levels do not pay adequate attention to the importance of developing precise endgame technique, leading to missed opportunities and subsequent feelings of disappointment or embarrassment. The following endgame tips will help you to capitalize on the slightest endgame advantages in no time!

'Lack of proper endgame technique allows many players to escape from lost positions, even without any spectacular play on their part.' – Leonid Shamkovich

Realize Critical Changes in the Position

This maxim can be applied to all stages of the game, but it is especially important in the endgame because there is less material remaining and every exchange becomes more significant. Pay attention to all possible long-term changes in the position, especially the pawn structures and any minor piece exchanges.

Of course, there are other important factors to consider such as the initiative, an attack, exchanges of heavy pieces, etc., but the main point here is that, as more pieces are exchanged in a chess game, the importance of the remaining pieces goes up.

Reacting to Change – Form a Plan

So you've been paying close attention to the significant changes in the game and realize the underlying dynamics have changed substantially. For example, there is a mass of exchanges and the dust clears – resulting in a material imbalance of rook + three pawns vs. bishop + five pawns. You must stop and take a good amount of time to think here, really trying to thoroughly understand the fundamentals of the position – enabling you to form a plan for your next 5-10 moves or more.

Imagination plays a key role in identifying positional objectives, as you should be focused on all possibilities in the position to find the best plan. Then all you have to do is stubbornly execute this plan under the tactical constraints of the position – assuming there have been no more critical changes!

Patience is a Virtue

When you impatiently move too fast and make mistakes, it is not conducive to success. Time management is one thing, but impulsively grabbing pieces is an-

other. In the endgame, this principle applies even more – because there are so many subtle tricks that can change the outcome from a win to a draw, or from a draw to a loss. Although you're not usually going to have much time left in the endgame, you can still employ a patient strategy to make sure you will not let your opponent slip out of a bad position. So don't play too fast on the clock or on the board, as steady progress will definitely achieve better results than loose moves with tactical holes.

'Patience is the most valuable trait of the endgame player.' – GM Pal Benko

Saving Tough Positions: Be Stubborn!

This is one of the most overlooked principles in chess. It's easy to stress the importance of aggressive chess psychology; however, the chess board is not a perfect place and never will be. No human chess player in the history of the game has been able to play perfectly 100 percent of the time, which means even the greatest chess players have been forced to defend difficult positions. And the strength of your chess psychology will dictate how you perform in these critical moments. If you are mentally unprepared and weak, there is a very good chance you will fall apart and lose as soon as things start looking bad.

Chess tournaments should not be played according to grandiose goals or expectations. They should be broken down into the smallest individual segments possible, basing your decisions on a game-by-game evaluation, and then more specifically on a move-by-move basis. If the big picture tournament scenario is pessimistic, this should have no bearing on your play in one individual game. Breaking down a chess tournament into a single game, and then into a single move, will enable you to focus exclusively on the only thing that actually matters – the position directly in front of you. Seven-time U.S. Chess Champion GM Samuel Reshevsky described his own style in the following way:

'My strength consists of a fighting spirit, a great desire to win, and a stubborn defence whenever in trouble. I rarely become discouraged in an inferior situation, and I fear no one.'

It's Not Over Until You Shake on It!

The sheer power of the stubborn defence in chess never ceases to amaze me. I've witnessed many games where a player had worked extremely hard in the opening and middlegame to achieve a big advantage, only to see the game equalized in a very short sequence of moves thanks to his opponent's hard-headed and attentive defence. Being able to keep your cool under pressure is a key ingredient to becom-

ing a better chess player, as even the world's greatest chess players find themselves in bad positions.

Past mistakes mean nothing; the only thing to focus on is the position in front of you and how you are going to push your opponent back to achieve some counterplay. The moment you give up on a position and condemn yourself to a sure loss, you might as well shake hands and leave because the game is over. Maintaining an impenetrable mental resistance in a tough position is the mark of the veteran chess player, impervious to previous mistakes and only focused on minimizing the damage.

'When you defend, try not to worry or become upset. Keep your cool and trust your position – it's all you've got.' – GM Pal Benko

A Half Point is a Lot Better than NO Point!

This seems like common sense, although this very basic piece of wisdom is easy to forget when you've been playing a four-hour game, and you're facing another hour or two of difficult defence. The easy way out of this situation is to give up in your head, make a few bad moves, lose the game and tell all your friends how lucky your opponent got. Ruefully saying, you had him on the ropes, and he is the luckiest guy to ever touch the pieces.

But let's keep it real. If you had dug deep in that critical time – if you had looked your opponent in the eye and thought 'I'm going to make you earn every inch', you know deep down that you could very well have drawn that game. Difficult positions are never fun to play, but they do happen quite often. So get used to it and try to make the most of a bad situation. And in any round, a half point is a lot better than nothing.

'However hopeless the situation appears to be there yet always exists the possibility of putting up a stubborn resistance' – GM Paul Keres

Chapter Five
How to Study Chess

Power of Preparation

It doesn't matter if you play chess on the scholastic, amateur, intermediate, advanced, or elite professional level – you always want to win as much as possible. Many chess players will tell you with a straight face that they only play chess and go to tournaments to have fun and enjoy the game – that winning simply isn't their largest source of motivation. I think that's completely insane – if you're going to do something at all, you should do it right. And in chess that means doing everything in your power to win.

'Winning is not a secret that belongs to a very few, winning is something that we can learn by studying ourselves, studying the environment and making ourselves ready for any challenge that is in front of us.' – Garry Kasparov

Objective Organization Yields Optimal Results

The pure chess player will do anything to win, under ethical constraints of course. One of the most common problems I encounter with my students during our chess classes is not just an overall lack of preparation, but complete confusion on where to begin. One of the main points I like to emphasize is the enormous benefit that structure, organization and routine will have on your game. Don't just stop at breaking down the decision-making process; evaluate the big picture on how you approach improvement. Be honest with yourself and identify your weaknesses to spend more time on targeting these specific areas of your game for improvement, even if they're not your favourite topics of study. Push yourself to evaluate your results through a cleanly objective lens to truly organize the most efficient and effective path to chess improvement.

Chess Training: Refine Your Approach!

A very frequent mistake at the beginner level is to bust out a book on openings and dedicate precious chess studying time and energy to the memorization of ridiculously specific continuations. It's great that you want to spend more time studying chess, but keep in mind that some training material should be emphasized more than others. Evaluating and refining your approach to the study of the game can drastically improve your performance at the chess board, and save you countless hours of ineffective studying.

Discipline is Paramount

Haphazardly studying for five minutes at a time with whatever readily available training material will not help you improve. Legitimate chess improvement requires a level of discipline that prefers to avoid shortcuts and opts for the steeper path to real knowledge and understanding. Consider the exercise of solving tactical puzzles, where many lazy chess players will momentarily glance at a puzzle and give up, skipping straight to the answer because they are too lazy to actually solve it. This superficial approach to chess study will not only fail to improve your chess game, it will make you worse by enforcing bad habits. *If you want to really improve at chess, you have to improve the way you think about studying it.*

'Chess, like any creative activity, can exist only through the combined efforts of those who have creative talent, and those who have the ability to organize their creative work.' – Three-time World Chess Champion Mikhail Botvinnik

Organizing a Regimen for Chess Study

A structured approach to studying chess yields the best results. Daily tactical exercises are an absolute must in any plan, and I would recommend dedicating a solid 15-20 minutes per day of focused study to this theme. To get the most out of studying tactics, you have to make yourself really try to solve every problem. It helps to write down your solutions, and compare them to the answers after you've completed a solid set.

A well-balanced chess game is without a doubt the strongest, so you want to make sure you balance this tactical diet with positional and endgame study. For beginner players, I recommend that they largely abstain from spending a lot of time and energy studying openings. From a long-term perspective, it is much better to learn the basic principles of opening play and understand them well than to memorize certain openings without understanding the concepts behind the moves.

You don't have to be a natural genius to be good at chess; you just have to be organized.

'Winning is not a secret that belongs to a very few, winning is something that we can learn by studying ourselves, studying the environment and making ourselves ready for any challenge that is in front of us.' – Garry Kasparov

Developing a Disciplined Routine

Mikhail Botvinnik led the Soviet School of Chess for decades in the 20th century, developing a brilliant method of chess training that revolutionized the approach to improvement in chess. Botvinnik was a three-time World Chess Champion (1948-57, 1958-60, 1961-63) with a PhD and a distinguished career in electrical engineering. Botvinnik was also a pioneer in the field of computer chess, and in the 1950s and 1960s, he developed an algorithm that enabled a computer to play reasonably well. Mikhail Botvinnik dominated the chess world through the eyes of a pure scientist, and it was this distinct perspective that led to his significant contributions to chess training and improvement. An overwhelming testament to Botvinnik's success is the fact that the Botvinnik School of Chess has turned out dozens of grandmasters, most notably former World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov.

'Chess, like any creative activity, can exist only through the combined efforts of those who have creative talent, the ability to organize their creative work... Chess is the art which expresses the science of logic.' – Botvinnik

Organize a Specific Routine and Stick to It!

Many people complain about working long hours, although they are only actually working a fraction of the time. Studying haphazardly for 45 minutes before dazing aimlessly for 20 minutes only to realize you have no idea what you're doing or will be doing next is not efficient. The same principle applies to chess training.

Developing and enforcing an organized regimen of training is the most effective method of improvement in chess as in any other endeavour. How much time you can spend studying chess depends on a variety of factors, so I've decided to list my recommendations for beginner players in percentages.

30% Tactics – Tactics are seen in every position. You especially want to focus on shorter combinations (2 or 3 moves) and tactical awareness so that you don't miss any easy wins.

25% Positional Play – While tactics are extremely important, many beginner and intermediate players will develop an unevenly balanced style by ignoring positional understanding. Positional chess forms the foundation of any position, while tactics represent the immediate needs.

20% Endgames – Endgames are incredibly important because it sometimes happens that you can't beat your opponent in the opening or middlegame. I'd recommend studying the games of Capablanca and Karpov for improving your endgame technique.

15% Openings – A basic level of openings is necessary to improve past the absolute beginner stages; however, many players neglect other areas of study and drastically overemphasize the importance of studying openings.

10% Psychology – The effect of chess psychology should not be underestimated, as your approach to the game determines your decision-making process every move.

'Mikhail Botvinnik insisted that we must recognize the rationale behind every move. All of Botvinnik's students learned to become great sceptics, even of the moves of the best players. Most of the time we eventually discovered that there was a powerful idea behind each Grandmaster move, but we also found improvements.' – Garry Kasparov

Study Smarter, Not Harder!

A pretty common thing to hear at the local chess club is 'between my job and other obligations, I just don't have time to study all these openings.' But some of the best players on earth right now have actually spent relatively little time studying openings (e.g. prodigies Magnus Carlsen and Anish Giri). Their secret: *Study Smarter, Not Harder!*

Knowing what to study is not enough – it's very important to know *how* to study. Essentially, you need to know *how* to maximize the time that you dedicate to studying.

Here are a few classic mistakes that beginner players make while studying.

Focusing on Quantity instead of Quality

The amount of games you study in 45 minutes is totally irrelevant, and trying to cram as many games as possible hurts you. I really believe that taking your time studying one classic game is ten times more useful than trying to cram three or

four games during the same amount of time. It can really pay off and increase your understanding of the big picture. Take time to understand what you are looking at and really let it sit!

Openings Aren't Everything!

Let me repeat that one more time, *openings aren't everything!* So you've studied chess for three years and memorized every opening known to man? Good for you, but I bet you're still having trouble at the tournaments. This is such a classic study mistake – spending 95 percent of your time studying openings. Yes, the enthusiasm is fantastic, but is this really good for your game?

A comprehensive, well-rounded approach to all phases is what will take your game to the next level.

Do NOT Try to Learn via Memorization

This really ties into my last point on openings. I'm sure with enough time you could train a chimpanzee to memorize a proper position and response. This doesn't mean the chimp (or you) understands what is going on. Memorization of certain positions is important for any kind of study, but really understanding the core concepts of what is happening on the board is a lot more important than automatically knowing what response to make to your opponent's move. Don't spend all your time blitzing through as many games as possible just to memorize the opening, like memorizing a math formula. This is especially true for beginners. *Take your time to carefully understand the nuances of the opening to really understand why the moves are played, not just what moves are played.*

Don't Underestimate the Endgame!

The endgame is definitely the most overlooked phase of the game. Without good openings and middlegame strategy you won't be able to achieve decent positions in the endgame. However, it is very important to understand basic endgame concepts and plans to defend difficult positions or win better positions with only a few pieces on the board.

Not Having a Plan is NOT Okay!

If you spend one hour per day studying but spend 30 minutes of that hour trying to figure out what to study you are wasting your time. Get a chess routine! Establishing a standard study routine will raise your rating 500 points in two weeks! Okay, maybe that is a little exaggerated, but a study routine will boost your rating significantly. Remember my reference earlier to quality not quantity – knowing

your attack plan will let you spend your time as wisely as possible. Improve on your targeted areas that need work. Figure out your weaknesses, attack them, and conquer at your next tournament!

Tips on Tactics

Strategy forms the basis of our long-term plans while tactics revolve around the current demands of the position. Incredibly deep positional manoeuvres have always fascinated the chess world; however, *an awesome plan for the next 15 moves means absolutely nothing if you blunder and lose immediately*.

Tactical awareness is one of the most important skills that a beginner player can develop, since the ability not to blunder will encourage rapidly improved results. Then there is the capacity to capitalize on the errors of your opponent, which will grant you countless quick wins. Before you can start thinking about the next fantastic 10 moves, you have to be fully aware of the tactical needs of the position in front of you. The following tips are excellent basic concepts that will improve your overall tactical ability.

Always Keep an Eye on Unprotected Pieces

This is one of the most important fundamental concepts in chess. You should always pay extra attention to your opponent's unprotected pieces, as the vast majority of potential tactics will certainly involve these loose pieces. Being aware of your opponent's unprotected pieces will present many combinations and quick wins. And on the flip side, you always want to be aware of your own unprotected pieces. You always want to be extra careful and avoid having loose pieces if possible. And if the game starts to unravel and enter extreme complications, the quick tactical wins will most likely revolve around unprotected pieces on either side.

'Whenever we see an unprotected piece we must keep our eyes peeled because this is one of the most important ingredients of a combination.' – Jacob Aagaard

Maintain Strong Combinational Awareness

This is somewhat related to the last concept of unprotected pieces; however, this idea is more general. You always want to be on the look-out for tactics in every position, whether against your opponent or potential tactics against you. Unprotected pieces are a key ingredient in this formula, although you also want to incorporate several other possibilities. It is absolutely critical to devote ample attention and time to examine all likely combinations in a given position, because discovering a powerful tactic can bring you the win instantly. And it's not enough

just to settle on the second-best tactical shot in a position and win a pawn – you need to be 110 percent sure that you are employing the absolute strongest move that will win the game in the fastest possible way.

Consistent Aggression and Pressure

Tactics do not spontaneously appear in chess – they are the result of consistent aggression and pressure. If you are constantly improving your position and making threats that your opponent must solve – you will find tactics appearing all over the place. However, if you play passively and your first inclination is to defend – you're only going to be on the receiving end of the combinations. Other fundamental components of tactics include pins, x-ray pressure, double attacks and discover checks – so you always want to pay special attention to these tactical precursors.

Consistent aggression and pressure will generate slight to strong advantages, at which point the winning chess tactics will begin to appear more naturally. One of the things that made Bobby Fischer so incredibly good at chess was that he almost never missed short two or three move combinations. He was able to create these frequent combinations in his games by applying constant pressure to his opponents – and he would capitalize on all possible opportunities with the most precise continuation to end the game as rapidly and accurately as possible.

'Tactics flow from a superior position.' – Bobby Fischer

Do You Need a Computer for Chess Training?

Computer chess programs have become exceptionally strong in the 21st century, capable of thoroughly dominating the world's best human players. There is no question about the extent to which computers have changed the game of chess in the last 20 years, not only raising the quality of play but making chess training more effective and efficient. Bobby Fischer broke a record in 1958 by attaining the grandmaster title at the age of 15. To date, this record has been broken over 20 times – the current title-holder is Sergey Karjakin of Russia, who became a GM at the age of 12 in 2002. Since the introduction of strong computer chess programs, the game has seen a complete revolution on all fronts.

The Good: Effective and Efficient

While Bobby Fischer taught himself how to read Russian so that he could study up on his Soviet counterparts, information in the 21st century is one click of the mouse away. When *Chess Informant* came out in 1966, it was a major step in the evolution of chess, but the buck did not stop there. There are now a plethora of

free tools that are easily accessible to anyone with an Internet connection: games databases, instructional videos and articles, and software/analytical engines are all readily available. If a chess player understands how to manipulate these resources the right way, he or she is capable of covering a lot more ground than someone 20 years ago (hence the rise of the 12 year-old GMs).

The Bad and the Ugly: Abusing the Machine

I have read many chess books and frequently utilize games databases – but very rarely use a chess engine for anything more than a quick check of a really complicated line or game. There a few reasons, but mainly *I prefer to do the work myself* – to thoroughly raise my understanding of the game is more important to me than trying to figure out the qualitative significance of White is +.67 in a given position. While at its core, chess is essentially a question of mathematics (there are 10 to the power of 40 possible outcomes) – improvement in chess is achieved through hard, meaningful work. You will learn more and increase your deep understanding of the game by doing the work yourself. Chess is not about memorizing your lines – it's about understanding.

Research with Grandmasters

I recently interviewed over 40 chess grandmasters for a series entitled 'How to Become a Grandmaster'. A variety of topics were covered, and I made sure to inquire about their opinion on the use of computers in chess training. Obviously, there are a variety of ways to use computers in chess (games databases, tactical training tools, Internet blitz games, chess engines, etc.) – but I wanted to know what, when, and how GMs utilized these tools on their path to success.

Games databases received an excellent score, with a recommendation to focus more on quality than quantity. Most GMs stated that extensive opening preparation can wait until a player is approaching the 2200-2300 mark. Tactical training tools are extremely easy and efficient to use, and should be consumed as part of a daily routine for players of all skill levels. Internet blitz ranked well, but special attention should be given not to over-do it. The use of chess engines is a complicated topic, but nearly all of the GMs I interviewed recommended players to stay away from chess engines until reaching a very advanced level. The reason is that the use of chess engines for the beginner to intermediate player is generally a waste of time. Most players will scan through the variations at light speed without actually comprehending what they are looking at. My advice for the average club player:

Stick to the simple tools that you understand well, and only consult the chess engine as a last resort.

Chapter Six
Practical Tournament Strategy

A well-planned tournament chess strategy can have an incredible impact on the results of the tournament chess player. Contemplating and developing a refined approach to playing chess tournaments is critical to success, as you will surely fare better than the casual and uninformed chess player that simply arrives for round one and focuses only on the moves. There are a variety of factors that contribute to chess tournament success; however, any master will tell you that preparation is one of the most important.

'Psychologically, you have to have confidence in yourself and this confidence should be based on fact.' – Bobby Fischer

The Importance of Off-the-Board Preparation

It's fantastic that many chess player devote hours of study per day to modern opening theory, tactics, common middlegame concepts, and endgame technique – but this is only polishing your on-the-board preparation. What about all the other ingredients to success: confidence in your ability to see the best line in a very complicated position, or confidence in your ability to accurately convert a small advantage in the endgame, or simply understanding your tournament standing, and what risks are appropriate and what risks are just not worth taking.

Chess psychology is a complicated problem because there are an infinite number of possible answers, and it is difficult to encounter a tangible scale that will definitively tell you if one perspective is the most correct. It is important to identify and evaluate all factors as objectively as possible. *Chess psychology is the force behind every move you make*, and it is essential to understand and appreciate its importance as you attempt to improve.

'I believe most definitely that one must not only grapple with the problems on the board, one must also make every effort to combat the thoughts and will of the opponent.' – Mikhail Tal

Risk Assessment during Tournaments

Anyone who has ever played a competitive sport will recall their favourite coach drilling the following expression into the back of their brain: *'Finish the Drill'*. It doesn't matter if you came out swinging in the first 75 percent of a chess tournament – if you fizzle in the most critical last-rounds, you will fail. At 25 years old and with a 2767 FIDE rating (March 2013), Hikaru Nakamura is the best chess player the United States has had since Bobby Fischer. Nakamura is a legitimate monster on the board, coming in at #8 in the world on the latest chess-rating update. However, even the greatest players make mistakes sometimes. At the 2011/12 Reggio Emilia Super-Tournament, Nakamura built a sizable 1.5 point lead over his nearest rival after seven of ten rounds. Nakamura continued to play as aggressively as possible and proceeded to lose all three remaining games, finally finishing in third place.

This is a perfect example of a badly conceived chess tournament strategy. Taking a few draws after a ferocious start is not timid; it's practical. And on the flip side of things, if you are chasing a tournament leader – you have to hit the gas and bust out all of the gambits and tricks you know to make a comeback. As you get closer to the end of a tournament, understanding your overall position and applying the necessary changes to your game is critical to success.

Maximize Your Level of Focus during Play

Achieving the optimal state of mind during a chess game is a very difficult thing to do. It is very easy to become distracted by the littlest things, to have your mental energy diverted by some completely irrelevant and trivial detail. The best chess players in the world are able to find the exact balance between using their mental and emotional energy while remaining completely calm and relaxed. Understanding the importance of achieving an aggressive state of mind while staying 100 percent calm and objective will certainly help your chess game grow, enabling you to brush off the distractions and put all of your mental capacity to work.

Identify Problems and Enforce Solutions

Lack of focus is the most common obstacle to a chess player's improvement, detracting and devaluing the time you have spent working hard to study and prepare for tournaments by allowing anxiety and nerves to affect your game. It is absolutely imperative to keep a firm grip on your emotions during a chess tournament, being careful not to allow them to negatively spill over into a game. Many players are simply unable to play their best chess without emotional energy and inspiration, but the best players are able to keep this energy in check and allow only its positive effects on their game, such as more energy in critical moments and an extra stubborn defence.

Garry Kasparov exemplifies the ability to harness the benefits of turning emotional energy into a powerful motivational tool, enabling him to push harder and harder for the win in difficult positions. Kasparov's games show an enormous amount of mental energy, and it was his fierce desire to win that pushed him to win and defend with longevity the title of world champion. Every chess player must individually find his/her perfect mental balance, that fine line between investing and pushing yourself emotionally while still playing an objectively sound game with machine-like analysis. After every chess tournament, you should analyse your games to persistently find ways to improve – and your psychological conduct should be examined under this auto-critical microscope with the same level of scrutiny as the moves themselves.

Get Your Mind Right!

The greatest deterrent to playing your best chess is allowing yourself to be distracted. Whether you're playing an opening you've played a thousand times before, or attempting to launch a decisive attack out of a complicated position – maintaining the maximum amount of concentration possible is going to permit you to play your best. This topic is especially relevant to the amateur and intermediate chess player, regardless of age or experience, because this is the single largest limitation to success in the game. And the worst part is – most chess players have no idea that they are afflicted with this terrible disease of being continually distracted. In the age of mind-numbing hyper-stimulation, it's easy to understand why many chess players have a hard time dedicating 100 percent of their mental capacity to the board in front of them. But this quality is exactly what separates the great players from the good – the ability to ignore all possible distractions and wrap their entire mind around the immediate problem on the chess board.

'Only through focus can you do world-class things, no matter how capable you are.' – Bill Gates

Without Focus and Execution, Potential Means Nothing

Mothers love to make excuses for problems or failures of their children: 'Oh you know he just has so much potential. He just made this mistake because he's not trying.' And this type of excuse is terrible because it is doing nothing to correct this maladaptive behaviour – it's actually encouraging the kid to make more mistakes because his mom continues to remind him how incredibly potentially talented he is.

Let's cut the nonsense and get to the facts. Failure to maximize your focus and use every ounce of potential you have equates to achieving sub-optimal results. Basically, if you can't control yourself to clear your mind and achieve optimal focus on the task at hand – your 'potential' is completely irrelevant. *The real world is focused on results, not potential outcomes if you had just tried a little bit harder – and the same maxim applies to chess!*

Nothing Good Comes Easy

Successful men and women nearly always accredit hard work, dedication, and preparation as the vehicles of their success – however, these things are simply impossible to achieve if you can't command your mind to operate on an optimal level. Rising to the occasion in one chess game and trying your hardest is a good thing, but this is only one small step in the ladder to success. Real victory comes to those who deserve it, who demand absolute focus from their mind at all times of work – extracting every ounce out of their 'potential' on a daily basis. It is not enough to merely put your mind to work when it's convenient – if you really want to succeed in chess (and life?), you have to push yourself by constantly expanding your limits of work. The best things in life are not given freely – they are usually fought for with every grain of mental energy and resolve.

'A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.' – Sir Winston Churchill

The Out-Gangster Effect

For one reason or another, a mysterious aura of excellence seems to exist around all advanced chess players. Beginner and intermediate chess players regard the advanced player with an incredible degree of respect, often resulting in an overestimation of abilities. I'm sure the following scene will be quite familiar to any chess player who's attended a handful of serious tournaments:

It's a huge Swiss tournament and in the early rounds a young/rising 1700 player is facing off against the local FIDE Master (FM). The young player has pre-

pared well for his experienced opponent, emerging from the opening with a strong initiative and a dangerous attack. The FM is able to push back the attack and the position becomes roughly equal, although both players are low on time after the complicated opening and middlegame – but there is still a lot of chess left to play.

A crowd gathers around the board and even though the position is completely equal, everyone is whispering how the FM has got the kid on the ropes and how 'He's going to close this out just like always.' The FM senses a critical moment and plays more determined than ever. Looking at the body language of the two players, you can tell that the experienced FM feels very comfortable in this situation and is thriving on the nervous energy/anxiety of the young 1700. Soon enough, the nerves get to him and the kid starts making passive/defensive moves. The FM becomes even more determined to win, and just like that – the kid makes a few small errors that lead to sudden defeat. Now why does this always seem to happen?

Strong Chess Psychology Will Win You Games!

When the game is equal and dynamically balanced as you approach the later stages, the mental fibre of the chess player will be tested. Your objective playing strength becomes less important and your psychological strength becomes the guiding factor to success. Understanding the importance of aggressive chess psychology can take your game to the next level, although you should be careful not to let previous defeats lead to continued feelings of anxiety or nervousness in such situations. Instead, you should feed off of these painful past experiences and learn from them.

How to Be on the Giving End of the Out-Gangster Spectrum

Personally, I hate losing more than just about anything else. This happens to be a great motivational tool... to win! Learning from previous defeats should not include perpetuating the same maladaptive behaviour. Giving due respect to a strong opponent is one thing, but overestimating him and constantly thinking in the back of your head that you know how bad he's going to beat you in the end is quite another. Playing 75 percent of a game well does not mean anything – the most important phase is the fourth quarter. So the next time you're entering the final phase of an important game and the stress is building to a maximum – *this is the exact moment when you need to buckle down and become extremely stubborn in your mission to win this game at all costs, no matter who the opponent is.*

Chess Tournament Preparation

Chess tournament preparation, whether at the junior, local or world level is al-

ways a nerve-wrecking activity. So you've been studying and playing a lot of practice games. You register for the next local tournament, take it easy on Friday night, sleep well, and even arrive 20 minutes early at the tournament hall to make sure you're comfortable and everything is set. Then the time comes to sit down and play, and you literally fall apart at the board and get destroyed in 13 moves. Where did it all go wrong?

Calm Your Nerves!

Chess, above all, is a game of nerves. You can study all you want, but if you can't control yourself at the board – you won't have a chance. Learning to be calm and collected is vital for chess tournament preparation. Make sure you take a deep breath and chill out. Sometimes I like to close my eyes at the beginning of a game, even if the clock is ticking, and completely clear my mind and remind myself that I am there to do one thing – win. So, maintain composure at all times. Focus on taking your time during chess tournaments. Many beginner players will impulsively grab pieces and make critical moves without taking any real time to think. This is a terrible idea! In a normal tournament, you usually have about 90 minutes for the entire game. You don't get bonus points for having extra time on the clock at the end of the game, so make sure you take all the time needed to make the best possible moves.

Critical Moments

There is no such thing as moves that don't matter in chess – every move is important. Nevertheless, some moves do mean more than others. Finely tuning your sense of critical situations is a requirement to excel. When you reach this important point, take your time! Clear your mind, forget everything that happened before, and identify the best course of action. When practicing for the tournament, see if you can 'feel' when these moments hit.

Forgetting Past Blunders

This really applies not only to chess tournament preparation but to your chess preparation, your chess psychology – essentially your chess game as a whole! Don't keep harping on a blunder; if it happened, then it's done. After you make a move, instantly forget about the previous positions and focus exclusively on the present and the future possible positions. This is extremely important. If you made a mistake on the move before, or five moves before – it does not matter anymore, so just move on. Play your best to win the game with what you have right in front of you.

Play the Board, Not the Opponent!

It is very easy to pay too much attention to the pairings, and specifically your opponent's rating. Over-emphasizing your opponent's rating is one of the most common mistakes a beginner player can make, potentially resulting in a lack of confidence, feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and generally bad play. It's okay to check the pairings and try to get a head start by trying to prepare against an opponent if you've played him or her before and are familiar with his or her style, but you never want to get too caught up in pre-game preparation – as it is very easy for your opponent to diverge from your last-minute preparation.

Getting anxious about playing a much higher-rated opponent is never going to help your game, so in many of my chess classes, I recommend a very simple solution to my students: when you look at the pairings, only check what board you're playing on and completely ignore your opponent's rating. This temporary solution will also help you avoid another dangerous common beginner pitfall – underestimating your opponent.

Don't Gamble, Play the Best Move!

From my brief experience in casinos, I know enough to stay away from gambling because the house always wins! The same principle applies in chess, in that a player who gambles by playing very loose moves against a lower-rated opponent, hoping his opponent doesn't find the flaws, is sure to get busted badly in the long run.

It's easy to look at the pairings and get nervous about playing against a higher-rated opponent, but it can be even easier to become over-confident about playing a lower-rated opponent – and even more dangerous. Playing sub-optimal moves against lower-rated opposition opens the door to embarrassing defeats and should not be taken lightly. The best chess players in the history of the game have maintained the ability to play the highest level of chess against all opponents, never permitting even the slightest chance of losing to an inferior rival.

In answer to the question: Who is your opponent tonight?: 'Tonight I am playing against the Black pieces.' – Akiba Rubinstein

Maintaining Equilibrium

Garry Kasparov and Bobby Fischer are two of the best chess players ever. Kasparov's main strength was in the opening, where his incredibly deep level of preparation in the sharpest lines of his time enabled him to obtain dangerous initiatives very early in the game. Bobby Fischer's opening preparation was also fantastic, permitting him to challenge the Soviet regime in the middle of the 20th

of a game certainly depends on the time control, but for your standard chess game (usually around 60 or 90 minutes) – each side has plenty of time to dissect and punish the mistakes of an opponent's hasty opening moves.

You will play your best chess by finding the ideal balance between trusting your instincts with fairly quick evaluations and moves, and developing your intuition to detect critical situations where you need to use more time on the clock to successfully navigate your way through a complicated position.

How to Find Your Correct Speed

It's not easy finding your unique, optimal speed for moves in chess – but the best place to look for improvements in speed of play can be found in your previous games. *One great way of evaluating your move speed is to write down how much time you have left on the clock right next to each move as you take notation during a game.* You should be analysing your games after each tournament anyway, but if you think you might not be moving at the best speed during each game, then this exercise can definitely help you pinpoint your problem. In my chess classes, this easy trick enables me to identify if there is a problem with my student's move speed – and if so, exactly where it occurs. It's easy to see if someone is moving way too fast in the opening, but sometimes this problem goes a little deeper than just blitzing out the first 10-15 moves.

I frequently encounter students who completely lose track of time in complicated positions – resulting in debilitating time trouble later in the game. By checking the student's notation matched up with the time remaining after each move, I'm usually able to determine where these types of problems occur. If a student is taking way too much time in complicated positions, I have often found that this is because he or she is suffering from a lack of confidence, resulting in the inability to take decisive action.

Constantly analysing past games and tweaking your individual chess style with an honest eye for scrutiny will lead to a guaranteed jump in improvement.

century with unparalleled success. Fischer also happened to play the endgame with computer-like precision, capable of making even the most experienced grandmaster's defence look flimsy and disorganized.

Incredibly deep and sharp opening preparation is great. Near-perfect precision in the endgame is definitely a good thing as well. But what really distinguished these two world chess champions from their contemporaries was their ability to recover from surprises on the chess board – taking everything in stride and patiently regrouping to regain their mental balance and continue to play at an optimal level.

'Chess is a unique cognitive nexus, a place where art and science come together in the human mind and are refined and improved by experience.' –Garry Kasparov

It's not a bad idea to take a few pointers from Fischer and Kasparov. If you take a good look at their careers, you will undoubtedly notice that they almost never lost two games in a row. Now I'm pretty sure that's not a coincidence. In fact, they were much more likely to comeback from a loss with a win in their next game. This is a great example of how a strong chess psychology and mental fibre can take your game to the next level. So just how can you start pointing your game in the right direction?

Baby Steps

The most basic element of mental balance is to focus on the position immediately in front of you. You must train yourself to ignore all external factors such as the tournament standing, whether you drew or lost a game in the previous round that you should have won, etc. The only thing that matters is the next move that you need to make. You also don't want to let high-pressure situations throw you off your normal game and style of play. Make sure you stand up in these tense moments and stick to the openings and types of positions you know best – play to your strengths. So the next time the road gets a little rocky and it starts becoming difficult to think straight, make yourself step away, calm down, and focus on the position in front of you and the next move you need to make. Clear your head and ignore all distractions, because a balanced mental equilibrium is sure to guarantee optimal results.

Don't Get So Emotional!

It is very natural that the more energy you put into a chess game, the more you become emotionally invested in the outcomes of your efforts. This can cloud your

judgment and lead to second-best decisions, which is exactly why you should be fully aware of the dangers of emotional thinking in chess. It is absolutely critical to play your best chess in every single game that you play, and to do that you will need to be thinking like a computer, calculating and strategizing with pure objectivity.

The more cognizant you are of the negative impacts of emotional and irrational thinking in chess, the easier it will be to avoid this maladaptive behaviour. I've noticed that beginners are especially afflicted by this problem in the opening stages of the game, playing their most excited (and usually worst) chess shortly after shaking hands with their opponent and beginning the game.

'Emotional instability can be one of the factors giving rise to a failure by chess players in important duels. Under the influence of surging emotions (and not necessarily negative ones) we sometimes lose concentration and stop objectively evaluating the events that are taking place on the board.' – IM Mark Dvoretsky

Control Your Emotions from the First Move

The opening is an essential part of chess, as the structure and pressure you are able to achieve will form the framework for the rest of the game. The amateur chess player is very prone to moving too fast in the opening and downright gambling, hoping that a rapidly achieved time advantage in the opening will carry over into enduring time pressure in the middlegame and endgame. While time pressure is a very real and dangerous element in chess, it should certainly not be overestimated.

Gambling with your emotions by impulsively moving too fast with the intention of putting pressure on your opponent via the clock is a very long-shot bet, and the percentages are definitely not in your favour. So the next time you feel yourself becoming too emotionally attached in a game and your judgment becomes affected – take some time to slow down, walk away, and clear your head to make sure you are making moves from a completely objective perspective.

Clock Management

Every chess player has their own unique individual style, and it is very important to understand the positive aspects that are conducive to success and the negative characteristics that contribute to failure. One of the most common beginner chess mistakes is clock mismanagement, specifically playing too fast in the opening in an attempt to 'save time' for later in the game. Sacrificing the quality of your moves because you want to achieve a big advantage on the clock in the opening is simply ineffective. Of course, how much time you consume throughout the course

Chapter Seven
The Benefits of Playing Chess

Chess Just Makes You A Lot Smarter

Anyone who plays chess will be pleased to tell the next guy just how good chess is for you. However, these altruistic chess promoters sometimes run out of specific ammunition and are forced to spit out generic sayings like 'Chess just makes you a lot smarter.' But wait a minute chess fans – there's plenty of reasons why chess is good for you. Chess teaches valuable lessons on and off the board.

Chess Makes You Organized

Okay, so maybe chess itself doesn't make you organized, but if you want to improve you will become organized one way or another. You might look at some grandmasters and think 'This guy really thinks he's some kind of artist. When is he going to cut/wash his hair?' But appearances aren't everything, and especially so in the chess world.

Just because that exceptionally strong grandmaster might look like a complete mess, don't be fooled as he has hidden in his disproportionally large brain an organized labyrinth of invaluable chess information. Going beyond plain old pattern recognition, this grandmaster has put in a lot of hard work to obtain those coveted letters in front of his name. And that work was definitely not done in a haphazard way – it was organized!

Efficiently evaluating a plan of preparation and effectively executing this plan does not happen by coincidence; it occurs due to a clear understanding of what is important and how to achieve it.

Chess Makes You Calculate Better

It doesn't matter how organized you are, if you're still missing mate-in-two's, you should probably work on how you calculate. I'm not talking biogenetics or pure

mathematics – I mean any type of basic calculation. Similar variations frequently transpose, and the same is true for life and chess. From calculating a basic cause and effect scenario (hungry man –> eats food = happy man) to discerning the most complicated chess puzzles – calculation is a fact of everyday life.

Acknowledging the necessity of calculation as a basic facet of survival can enable us to organize a plan on how to increase our own calculative capacities and therefore success. And one great way to improve the ability to calculate is to develop a daily routine of studying chess tactics. Just 15-20 minutes per day of tactical exercises keeps the brain alert, fresh, and smart – firmly backing up the argument that 'Chess just makes you smarter.'

Chess in Education – Making Kids Smarter

Not only does chess develop essential mental skills and abilities, it is also capable of doubling improvement in reading and math. The benefits of chess in schools range even farther, definitively improving social skills for children of all backgrounds – truly levelling any socioeconomic factors to encourage intellectual development on an even playing field. A five-year study of seventh and eighth graders by Robert Ferguson of the Bradford, PA School District showed that test scores improved 17.3 percent for students regularly engaged in chess classes, compared with only 4.56 percent for children participating in other forms of 'enrichment activities' including Future Problem-Solving, Dungeons and Dragons, Problem-Solving with Computers, independent study, and creative writing. A WatsonGlaser Thinking Appraisal evaluation showed overwhelmingly that chess improved critical thinking skills more than the other methods of enrichment.

In today's world of non-stop technological action and instant click satisfaction, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) is more prevalent than ever. Due to its very nature, chess may serve as a cognitive and behavioural treatment for ADD by requiring unwavering attention and dedication for prolonged amounts of time. There is absolutely no doubt that the growing movement in the USA to achieve widespread institution of chess in school curricula will achieve exponential educational benefits.

Research on Benefits of Chess in Education

A youngster taking part in a chess program develops many skills: critical thinking; logic, reasoning and problem-solving abilities; memory, concentration and visualization skills; confidence; patience; determination; poise; self-expression; and good sportsmanship. And perhaps more importantly, children who participate in the program improve their self-esteem.

(Excerpt from 'Chess Is the Gymnasium of the Mind', Chesshouse.com)

...the game is fairly democratic. You need a certain build to try out for the football team or a certain amount of money to play golf, but chess cuts across racial, economic and gender barriers. All you need, besides an opponent, is a board and 32 pieces.
(Excerpt from Evan Levy's article 'Check Mates' in Time Magazine)

Funding for chess activity is available under the 'Educate America Act' (Goals 2000), Public Law 103-227, Section 308 b.2 E.: 'Supporting innovative and proven methods of enhancing a teacher's ability to identify student learning needs and motivating students to develop higher-order thinking skills, discipline, and creative resolution methods.'

In a Texas study, regular (non-honors) elementary students who participated in a school chess club showed twice the improvement of non-chessplayers in reading and mathematics between third and fifth grades on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills.

The Venezuela 'Learning to Think Project,' which trained 100,000 teachers to teach thinking skills and involved a sample of 4,266 second-grade students, reached a general conclusion that chess, methodologically taught, is an incentive system sufficient to accelerate the increase of IQ in elementary age children of both sexes at all socioeconomic levels. (B)
(Excerpted from 'Why Chess', Chesshouse.com)

Jo Bruno, Principal, P.S. 189, Brooklyn, NY: 'In chess tournaments the child gets the opportunity of seeing more variety and diversity. There are kids who have more money than they have, but chess is a common denominator. They are all equal on the chessboard. I believe it is connected academically and to the intellectual development of children. I see them able to attend to something for more than an hour and a half. I am stunned. Some of them could not attend to things for more than 20 minutes.'
(Excerpted from 'New York City Schools Chess Program' by Christine Palm, 1990)

Adrian de Groot, a psychologist in the 1960s became very interested in the use of chess as an educational tool. He began studying the thinking behaviour of chess players in Russia. In particular he observed that there was a significant difference in approach between those who were highly skilled and experienced in chess to those who were new to the game. Initially de Groot assumed that the Grandmaster's superiority lay in their ability to organize well and to memorize concrete lines of play. What de Groot found was quite different: Grandmasters did not rely on

superior memory skills. Grandmasters were not any better at recalling randomly placed pieces than novice chess players were. The Grandmaster however was able to take actual chess positions and in an astonishing 5 seconds recognize a complex chess configuration and decide on a successful move. How were the GM's able to give accurate, well-thought-out evaluations in so little time? It seemed that GM's (but not novices) were able to recognize familiar configurations, and associating them with appropriate moves and plans.
(Excerpt from 'Role of Chess in Modern Education' by Marcel Milat, Chesshouse.com)

An act concerning instruction in chess and supplementing Chapter 35 of Title 18A of the New Jersey Statutes. Be it enacted by the Senate and General Assembly of the State of New Jersey:

1) The Legislature finds and declares that:

a) chess increases strategic thinking skills, stimulates intellectual creativity, and improves problem-solving ability, while raising self-esteem;

b) when youngsters play chess they must call upon higher-order thinking skills, analyze actions and consequences, and visualize future possibilities;

c) in countries where chess is offered widely in schools, students exhibit excellence in the ability to recognize complex patterns and consequently excel in math and science; and

d) instruction in chess during the second grade will enable pupils to learn skills which will serve them throughout their lives.

2) Each board of education may offer instruction in chess during the second grade for pupils in gifted and talented and special education programs. The Department of Education may establish guidelines to be used by boards of education which offer chess instruction in those programs.
(Excerpt from Senate Bills #S452 and #A1122)

Why Are Some Kids So Talented at Chess?

Why are some kids so good at chess? How do some chess prodigies that are barely 10 years old manage to play chess at a master level with little formal chess coaching? How have they managed to accelerate their intellectual development in this specific field at such an exceptional rate? What lessons can we learn from these prodigies and their secrets that we can use to teach better chess to all children? It is difficult to determine exactly which cultural, biological, and/or environmental factor plays the greatest role in this phenomenon.

Samuel Reshevsky, Bobby Fischer and More...

In the early 20th century, Samuel Reshevsky began dominating simultaneous exhibitions against experienced masters before he turned ten years old. In 1958, Bobby Fischer won the U.S. Championship when he was only fourteen. Yet these achievements have been overshadowed by the increasing number of child prodigies who are becoming the dominant force in the changing face of modern chess. The term 'chess prodigy' traditionally referred to a young master who was competing on equal footing with experienced professionals; however, in the 21st century a true prodigy would be a junior that is capable of competing for the World Championship.

Natural Intelligence or Cultural/Environmental Factors?

Humans haven't evolved too much in the last 100 years, so we must look to cultural and environmental factors to explain the emerging phenomenon and rising potential for a junior to compete for the World Chess Championship. Who is teaching chess to these up-and-coming juniors? Well before having children, Laszlo Polgar wrote *Bring Up Genius!* in which he explained 'Genius equals work and fortunate circumstances' and 'Geniuses are made, not born.' Laszlo went on to prove his theory by raising three exceptional female chess players – Susan Polgar achieved the GM title at 21, Judit Polgar achieved the GM title at 15, and their sister Sofia is a strong IM. While Laszlo certainly maintains an above-average IQ, biological predisposition alone cannot explain these results.

The Polgar sisters developed their impressive chess skills in a favourable environment conducive to high quality chess tutoring and very diligent, hard work.

Lots of Tutoring or Naturally Gifted? – The 10,000 Hour Rule

The article 'Developing Young Chess Masters: What are the Best Moves?' by Kiewra and O'Connor *presents a detailed study confirming hard work and a positive environment are necessary requisites to create genius in chess.* Referring to young chess masters, the article states 'These youngsters, on average, practiced chess about 20 hours per week for eight years before attaining master status. Even if they were born with incredible gifts, it still required about 8,000 practice hours to realize those gifts.' That doesn't quite meet the criteria for Malcolm Gladwell's '10,000 Hour Rule', which states that anyone can achieve mastery in a chosen subject with 10,000 hours of targeted practice; however, this estimate certainly comes close. Practice alone is not enough, it must occur in a favourable environment to achieve optimal results. The article also discusses the financial investment parents make: 'Most spend about $5,000-$10,000 annually on lessons, tournament registrations,

travel, and materials.' While it is not 100 percent mandatory for success, nearly all the rising chess masters had been working with titled players for multiple years prior to exemplary achievement.

Effect of Technology on Chess Prodigies

While improvements in chess genius creation techniques have raised the global Prodigy Per Capita (PPC) rate and parents have become more financially and emotionally supportive of their rising stars, there is one more significant factor in this equation – technology. Google Translate wasn't available in the 50s and 60s, so Fischer taught himself how to read Russian, so that he could study recently published games and annotations in Russian chess magazines. Today, not only does ChessBase with the Mega Update maintain a database of nearly five million games, you can use four different and highly powerful chess engines (simultaneously!) to analyse positions to technical perfection. *The invention of the Internet and relevant technologies have made information sharing immediate, and the development of young chess players has benefited exponentially.*

No Substitute for Hard Work

There are a plethora of contributing factors to the development of chess genius at a comparatively young age – and that 'young age' is going down every day. Biological predisposition and technology have definitely accelerated the learning curve; however, an intensively favourable environment yields the most effective results. *The true secret to success is theoretically simple yet operationally difficult: Long Hours of Hard Work.*

Can Chess Help People with Alzheimer's Disease?

Nearly everyone has a close family member or friend who is afflicted by mental dementia or Alzheimer's. Current treatment methods combine medication and behavioural approaches to reduce the effect and growth of Alzheimer's Disease (AD); however, there is no complete cure. *Recent research indicates that playing chess can reduce the risk of AD by up to 75 percent (see details below).* GM Viktor Korchnoi certainly comes to mind – he continued playing lots of chess throughout his sixties and seventies, and at a very high level as well! A recent experiment also suggested evidence that caffeine consumption could help prevent and/or treat AD (see details below). If the horribly debilitating effects of Alzheimer's disease and dementia can be combated by a daily chess game and a cup of coffee – why not give it a shot?

Relevant Research

'It is similar to the physical state. If you exercise and build up muscles then you become more resistant to injury and other illnesses. If you exercise your brain, then you are also more resistant to the effects of dementing illnesses such as Alzheimer's. If you challenge the brain, you lay down new connections and promote growth of new cells in areas which are affected by Alzheimers.'

The day may not be far off, according to Professor Verghese, 'when doctors recommend a game of chess along with physical exercise and a healthy diet.'

(Statement from Professor Joe Verghese from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine)

'Challenging your brain can have positive effects. The plasticity of the brain is directly related to the production of new dendrites, the branched, tree-like neural projections that carry electrical signals through the brain. Every time you challenge your brain it will actually modify the brain. We can indeed form new brain cells, despite a century of being told that it's impossible.'
(Statement from Dr Gene Cohen, the director of the Centre for Ageing, Health and Humanities at George Washington University)

A report filed in 2003, in the New England Journal of Medicine and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science showed that chess and other brain activities, like crosswords and reading, delays the onset of Alzheimer's Disease, dementia, and other mental illnesses (ABC).

Alzheimer's Disease is a debilitating disease that affects the elderly and the families that need to care for them. Pre-senility actually begins in the 40s and 50s and progresses to dementia and total senility, or helplessness.

Alzheimer's Disease is the leading mental illness in elderly and the number of cases is expected to rise sharply in the near future as baby-boomers approach retirement age between 60 – 70 years old. The need to prevent and treat the disease is a priority for medical scientists that will be caring for these people.

See www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19168359/ns/health-alzheimers_disease.

Symptoms include memory loss that disrupts daily life, planning and problem-solving challenges, time and place confusion, difficulty completing common or routine tasks, speech difficulties, misplacing items, social withdrawal, poor judgment and emotion/mood changes (Alzheimer's Association). Brains of Alzheimer's patients have plaques and tangles, or a protein build-up between nerve cells and protein build-up inside nerve cells, respectively (About.com). Plaques and tangles

tend to develop as people age; however, patients with Alzheimer's have many more than average.

Scientists are at a loss as to what the actual cause is. About.com reports that age, family history, diet, and lifestyle factors increase the risk. Recently, Dr Robert Friedlander, lead scientist of this report, suggested television is also a risk factor among other passive brain activities! Without a specific cause, therapy can only address the symptoms and also delay the onset.

(Excerpt from combined research at Chessville.com)

Chess: A Treatment That Works!

'Chess seems like a treatment that works. In fact, people over the age of 75 that partake in leisure activities that stimulate the brain were less likely to develop signs of dementia (Healthy Living). Research shows that chess affects specific areas of the brain, and the stimulation will shift with the problems that a chess player faces during the game. And the game lends itself to a variety of complexities from various patterns to complex calculations that stimulate players' brains. Dr Friedlander says that people who don't exercise their grey matter stand a chance of losing brain power when they age.

A five year study with 488 participants showed that involvement in at least 11 mind-exercising activities per week versus a control group that engaged in 4 or less activities per week, delayed mental dementia by 1.3 years (Dr Charles B. Hall, PhD, author of the study, and Saul R. Korep, Department of Neurology, professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine). A further analysis demonstrated those that played only games reduced their risk by 75% and those that played musical instruments reduced theirs by 64%. Crossword puzzle enthusiasts get a 38% lowered risk.

Scientists are still at a loss to determine the actual cause of Alzheimer's Disease, but with nearly 100 million future Alzheimer's victims in development, we best start writing prescriptions for chess sets for Christmas.'

From the June 19, 2003, *New England Journal of Medicine*: 'Use It or Lose It — Do Effortful Mental Activities Protect against Dementia?' by Joseph T. Coyle, M.D.

(Excerpt of combined research from http://adamporth.blogspot.com*)*

Chapter Eight
Chess and Business

Applying Chess Principles to Business: The Decision-Making Process

One of the ways I justify spending so much time on chess is by coming up with ways that it improves other useful skills and facets of my life. Let's look at how common processes in chess can be applied to improving your skills in business. Personally, after reviewing the effects of studying and playing a considerable amount of chess, I have noticed a vastly more efficient approach to my decision-making process.

Identifying and Evaluating Long-Term Factors

In any given position in a chess game, I am constantly identifying and evaluating the critical factors of the position. First, I begin with the intangible and long-term positional variables, like what will be my plan for the next five to ten moves, and where will my pieces be most effectively and flexibly placed in accordance with the demands of the position? How has the position changed in the last few moves? Once I have identified and objectively evaluated all of the long-term strategic factors in the position, I am able to come up with positional goals that can be reasonably achieved based on the specific position in front of me.

Reacting to Immediate Demands

After evaluating the strategic demands of the position and creating a long-term plan, I am ready to proceed to the immediate demands of the position and clearly organize my analysis. What are my possible candidate moves? What are the most forcing moves in this position that will cause my opponent the most difficulty? After reviewing all possible moves, I usually try to narrow the selection down to two or three realistic possibilities. By comparing these moves and using the proc-

ess of elimination, I will go with the move that is the most naturally aggressive and which fits in line with my long-term strategic goals. To achieve maximum effect with a chess move, you have to take into account and adapt your plan to account for all short-term and long-term factors in an equation.

Let's Get Back to Business!

This exact same model for the decision-making process can be applied to business. It is absolutely essential to maintain an attitude of flexibility and objectivity to succeed in today's business world. Technology has made an incredible impact in the 21st century, and to be successful you must be able to adapt to this constantly changing environment in real time. *Whether assessing immediate needs or long-term goals, you must evaluate ALL given factors in a position to determine the all-around best solution.* This method of decision-making will ensure that you receive the most efficient and effective results for your work, truly acting in accordance with the demands of the current position.

Common Tactics to Improve Efficiency

Applying organizational models in chess to the field of business is an extremely effective way to improve the efficiency of your processes. Incorporating clear concepts in chess such as coordination, focal points and prophylaxis can turn your business skills into sharply honed tools that perform even better under pressure. Taking time to evaluate your approach to business can have an exponential effect on your results. Here are a few of my favourite tactics that I've taken from the chess board and applied to the business world.

A Coordinated Strategy Performs Best

My professional experience relates primarily to marketing and sales, two areas in business where it is required to have an aggressive mentality to achieve optimal results. A marketing plan that is not organized will almost certainly display inconsistent and mediocre results. And the same goes for business development and sales – if you are not 100 percent prepared to hit all possible fronts in a coordinated attack, you are setting yourself up to fail. Whether putting together a national marketing campaign, a targeted business development initiative, or trying to organize a decisive kingside attack – an effectively coordinated plan of attack will help to guarantee the best results.

What are Focal Points?

Focal points are simply the specific targets of the attack. By identifying the most important objectives, you will allow yourself and your team to find the most effec-

tive methods of achieving these goals. In chess, a focal point typically represents one single square at which an attacker will be trying to focus all of his pieces. The idea is not to attack a vaguely defined area or collection of squares, but to manoeuvre all possible resources to exert maximal influence on one critical point. The same method can apply to business, as the marketing manager will want to allocate all relevant promotional material into a cohesive force that is targeted at achieving a focused objective.

Prophylaxis – Stopping Threats Before They Appear

Prophylaxis on the chess board was personified by former World Champion Tigran Petrosian, whose style involved protecting against all possible threats and subduing the opponent's activity in a patient plan to take advantage of any possible over-extensions or weaknesses in the opponent's position. Unfortunately in business things are not so clear, as it's very rare in any industry to only face one opponent. However, the rule of prophylaxis is definitely applicable on a large scale in the business world. Especially in the 21st century when the rules of engagement are constantly changing due to the rapidity of technological advances; the modern businessman must be attentively engaging in prophylactic measures to prevent any possible breakdowns.

A good example is the sales manager who maintains relations with previous leads, but is always looking for more companies to diversify his sales efforts in an attempt to avoid any let-downs in productivity. *Hedging your efforts and investments in business is a great example of prophylaxis in that you are reducing your overall risk by preventing threats before they appear.*

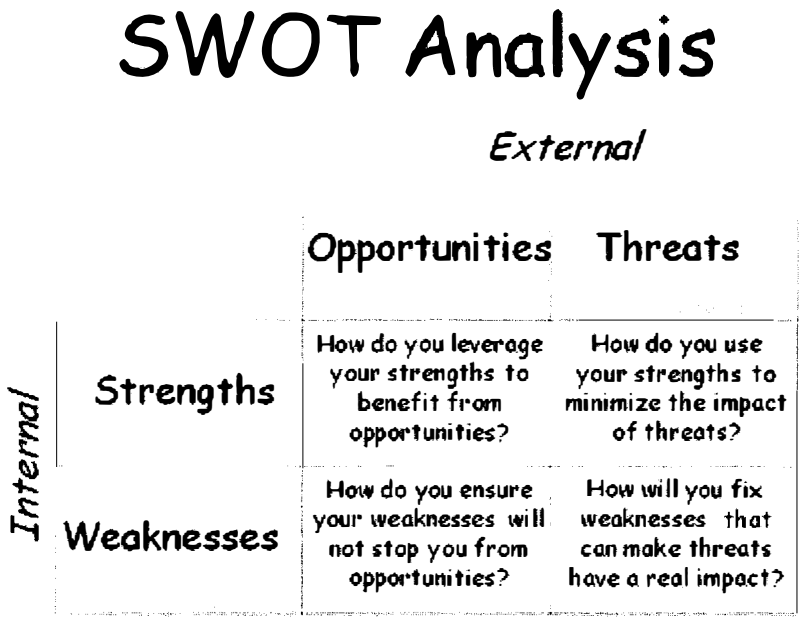
Using Business Processes for Chess – the SWOT Analysis

The similarities associated with the decision-making process, analytical model, and strategic planning in chess and business are undeniable. Specifically, our decision-making process defines who we are and what we are able to accomplish. Thoroughly identifying, objectively evaluating, and continually improving our approach and execution of our individual decision-making process are essential requisites of success. Working hard and being smart is no longer enough to experience great success in the current global economy. It is absolutely paramount to frequently and persistently re-examine the way we make decisions. Garry Kasparov says in his book *How Life Imitates Chess* (2007):

'It's not enough to be talented. It's not enough to work hard and to study late into the night. You must also become intimately aware of the methods you use to reach your decisions.'

While there are plenty of articles out there citing the overall benefits of playing chess and the relationship to retaining a sharp business mind, the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis that is so commonly used in the business world can help our analytical chess thinking skills. While chess is mainly a tactical game, using the SWOT analysis will help you with the analytical side of the game.

A Brief Explanation of the SWOT Analysis


SWOT Analysis
External
Opportunities
Threats
Internal
Strengths
How do you leverage your strengths to benefit from opportunities?
How do you use your strengths to minimize the impact of threats?
Weaknesses
How do you ensure your weaknesses will not stop you from opportunities?
How will you fix weaknesses that can make threats have a real impact?

The SWOT analysis model is extremely well-known in the business world, and for good reason. SWOT is extremely simple and to the point – identify your strengths and weaknesses with respect to opportunities and threats, objectively evaluate your analysis, and make the best decision. However, this is easier said than done. You can very easily fall into a simple routine and fail to capitalize on the most promising opportunities. By continually re-evaluating your process of making decisions, you will put yourself in a position to achieve the most efficient and effective results.

'By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.' – Confucius

Analyse Your Strengths and Weaknesses by Phases

The easiest way to do this is by making a well-known division of your game into three phases – the Opening, Middlegame, and Endgame. If you're achieving terrible positions in the opening – why would you spend time studying endgames first? A logical progression of study would seem to generate better overall results. This process is not meant to disregard the other phases of the game; it is to say that a well-thought-out, balanced plan of development as a chess player is the most efficient and effective method.

For example, once you have identified your strengths in the opening phase, you will be able to more efficiently study the resulting middle and endgame positions. This provides a well-rounded strategy for short-term and long-term development as a chess player. Identify what you are good at (and enjoy) and capitalize on this strength (opportunity). On the flip side, identifying honestly your weaknesses will enable you to improve them or avoid similar positions altogether. Bettering your decision-making process and developing a balanced strategy for improvement (as a chess player) is only made possible through genuinely honest and objective reflection and evaluation. As you gain more information throughout this process, it is essential to adapt your decisions to the changing information that they should be based on.

Always Check and Balance Your Opportunities and Threats

Beginner chess players have a tendency to jump at a quick opportunity to win an extra pawn or dive into a trap or gambit without seeing the true outcome. In business the SWOT analysis isn't only about seeing your opportunities and threats but comparing them against each other. Chess is very useful in training a business mind because a beginner entrepreneur may also jump into a potential opportunity without properly balancing out the risks and threats. A true chess master will always carefully analyse both opportunities and threats, and combine it with his known strengths and weaknesses to result in the best analytical decision.

'Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.' – Stephen Hawking

Chapter Nine
Additional Resources

Websites for Chess Training

OnlineChessLessons.NET

OnlineChessLessons.NET has become a highly popular chess website due to its emphasis on free content and the dedicated promotion of chess to all corners of the globe. With a heavily-trafficked blog that is updated daily with premier content, they constantly publish promotional material by well-known grandmasters like Ron W. Henley, Anatoly Karpov, Alexey Shirov, Yasser Seirawan, Lev Alburt and Igor Smirnov. And if the free chess videos and articles aren't enough for you, the OnlineChessLessons.NET shop frequently offers discounts on their extensive and ever-changing selection of popular chess DVDs and books.

If you have any general questions about chess and how to improve as a player, coach, promoter or tournament organizer – the OnlineChessLessons.NET team is extremely engaged with the chess community via large social media efforts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and is always available for assistance.

ChessTempo

www.ChessTempo.com is my #1 spot for chess tactics on the Internet. ChessTempo's software is incredibly easy to use, and I highly recommend it for beginner chess players. Be sure to register for an account on ChessTempo, so that as you progress through the tactics, you will be awarded a rating and provided exercises of appropriate difficulty.

ChessTempo also offers extensive endgame training as well as a very large database of chess games totalling over two million games. You can also play against a strong computer program if you want to test out a few opening lines. And if you

have any questions whatsoever about the site or about general chess affairs, the ChessTempo forum is very receptive and informative. The simplicity of ChessTempo's site and software is exactly what makes it such an attractive option for online chess training.

Chess Tactics Server

The Chess Tactics Server at www.chess.emrald.net is something of a hidden gem; it isn't very well-known but it packs a punch for chess training! This is a great site that focuses almost exclusively on tactics with a tight-knit community constantly competing to make it to the top of the rating system.

IdeaChess

One of the best things about www.ideachess.com is that their 70,000+ chess puzzles are defended by a computer program, so if you enter an incorrect solution the computer will play it out against you to prove it! IdeaChess is also great for kids, offering a huge section of checkmate puzzles. Another nice feature of IdeaChess is that you can export the FEN of tactical puzzles, so if you stumble across an excellent idea, you can download the sequence and review it later with a friend or class. IdeaChess also uses a rating system to evaluate your continually changing playing/solving strength, which can be very effective for the competitive tournament player in analysing what is and isn't working in a training regimen.

WTHarvey

www.wtharvey.com is the undisputed most-visited site for people looking for chess puzzles. And don't let the lack of graphic design fool you – this is definitely a great resource. Wtharvey.com is not for the light-hearted or uncommitted chess fan – there is no fluff, games database, forum, endgame tool, or fancy chess tactics software. WTHarvey is only concerned with chess puzzles that occurred in real grandmaster games, and the simplicity of the site enables the viewer to quickly and easily access what they want. Another great feature is that users can search puzzles by chess opening, making it really easy to study common traps in an opening scheme.

Online Games Databases

ChessGames.com
ChessGames.com has risen to the elite of online chess games databases in recent years, establishing a reputation of quality and consistency. They are always on top of their game, obtaining games on the same day from top international and national chess tournaments. ChessGames.com maintains smooth, easy-to-use software for chess players of all levels – and their advanced search option guarantees that you can find the game you are looking for. ChessGames.com is a pure games database and does not offer tactical/endgame training, although their forum community is extremely active and offers insider insight on many popular/classic chess games. One of my favourite features of ChessGames.com is the player profile, enabling users to rapidly and efficiently browse the most important and exceptional games of a player's career. For daily study and inspiration, I recommend checking out ChessGames' 'Game of the Day'.

ChessLab.com
ChessLab.com started in 1999 and maintains a chess games database of over two million games. A bonus offered by ChessLab.com is that you can search for a list of games by position, making it really easy to research a specific opening detail. Although the software is a bit tricky to figure out, once you've got it down, you can move forward to their more advanced features. My favourite is the position search with an analysis engine to tell you exactly what's going on in any given position.

365chess.com
365Chess.com specializes as a games database with over 3.5 million games; however, they also offer a variety of other chess-related features. Their 'Chess Puzzles' section is user-friendly and is definitely an effective way to work on tactics. The 'Opening Explorer' facilitates studying opening theory and the 'Search Position' allows users to go even deeper into their favourite opening lines.

Playing Chess Online

ChessCube
www.ChessCube.com is an online chess community with over two million users and a focus on online tournament play. Their interface is exceptionally easy to set up and use, and does not require a download. ChessCube also has a great Chess960 option and audience. It is completely free to play at ChessCube, and a great online environment for younger players.

Chess.com
Chess.com is an online chess community with over four million members. They currently have one of the most active chess forums on the Internet, and their playing software is very fluid and does not require any downloads. Their focus is diverse and reflects communities for just about everything related to chess (e.g., live play, tournaments, articles, videos, forums, strategies, etc.).

FICS
www.freechess.org – Free Internet Chess Server. This site is fantastic to pick up an online game against opponents from all over the world – excellent for players of all levels (beginner to advanced). You have to register on FICS, and then download an interface to play. I recommend using Thief for PCs and Jin for Macs. FICS is one of the best websites in the world for playing variants such as Bughouse, Crazyhouse, Loser's Chess and Atomic Chess.

Computer Analysis Programs (Engines)

Stockfish
Stockfish Chess is the most user-friendly computer chess engine on the market, and, by on the market, I do mean it is completely FREE. One of the best things about Stockfish Chess is that the programmers have made this chess engine compatible with nearly every computer operating system around (Windows, Mac, Linux and even Android!). You can also download Stockfish Chess for your iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad – again provided 100 percent free, so you can study chess on the move. While computer chess engines are notorious for difficult user interfaces, I found Stockfish Chess to be refreshing in that it is much easier to navigate. Stockfish Chess is also open-sourced, and the programmers actively encourage its free distribution to the general chess public. You can download Stockfish at http://www.stockfishchess.com.

Fruit
Fruit is also very user-friendly and features a unique playing style and customized opening book that complements other chess engines very well. Fruit is an extremely strong chess engine and is available for Windows, Linux, and Mac OS X – it is open-source and available for a free download at http://www.fruitchess.com.

Houdini
Houdini Chess is a free chess engine that has conquered the world of computer

chess in the last two years. While the latest versions of Houdini cost about $50 USD, version 1.5a is completely free to the general public. Houdini is a freakishly strong program that allows the user a variety of different training exercises, including playability in Chess960 (a variant of chess where the pieces are shuffled on the back rank). Houdini Chess is famous for its overwhelming strength in positional chess, a very rare quality for a computer chess engine. As with many computer chess programs, the downside of Houdini Chess is that it is only available on Windows (sorry Mac users!). You can download Houdini at http://www.cruxis.com/chess/houdini.htm.

Firebird
Firebird Chess is considered to be one of the best computer chess programs in the world, and it is also 100 percent free. Another bonus of Firebird Chess for the chess community is that the programmers have published the code as open-source – meaning that anyone (with a heavy background in programming) can easily check out the code. Open-source chess programs are becoming the new wave, as the entire world-wide community can freely chime in with suggestions for improvement. Unfortunately, Firebird Chess is also only available on Windows-based operating systems, but hopefully, we'll see more free chess engines for Macs in the future. Firebird Chess is one of the strongest computer chess engines today, and is a great addition to the arsenal of the serious chess player. Firebird chess does not have a centralized site, but the engine download is readily available via multiple websites (e.g., chess.com forum).

Chess News Websites

www.ChessDailyNews.com
ChessDailyNews is run by GM Susan Polgar and remains one of the most popular chess news websites. ChessDailyNews actively promotes the 'Susan Polgar Foundation', a non-profit organization that emphasizes the importance of chess in education.

www.ChessBase.com
ChessBase is one of the oldest chess news websites and has a reputation for remarkable consistency.

www.ChessDom.com
ChessDom's coverage of international events is outstanding, and they are well-

known for publishing interviews with the world's leading grandmasters. ChessDom also works closely with ChessBomb, a recent addition that broadcasts important tournament games live with ongoing computer analysis.

www.ChessVibes.com
ChessVibes offers an interesting perspective on the concept of chess news, providing a different take from opinionated journalists/bloggers: Peter Doggers, Thomas Richter, Arne Moll and others. ChessVibes does a great job of presenting behind-the-scenes info with tongue-in-cheek commentary, resulting in an easy-to-read blog about the world's best players and events.

www.TheWeekInChess.com
The Week in Chess (TWIC) provides the most frequent updates on the happenings of the chess world, containing game PGNs and results for every possible chess tournament of interest. If you are an experienced player who prefers to analyse on your own, then The Week in Chess is the chess website for you!

www.2700chess.com
2700Chess.com is an impeccably maintained site that concerns itself with only the elite of the chess world – monitoring and publishing updates on the ratings, tournament and games of the world's best grandmasters rated 2700+ FIDE.

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"That is part of what I like in chess: it is psychological warfare at the board."

Magnus Carlsen during an interview with the BBC, March 2013

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In chess, more than in any other game, battles are won and lost in the mind. US National Master William Stewart is convinced that a positive attitude is crucial if you want to develop and achieve success as a chess player, and in this book he focuses on the vital subject of chess psychology. All the key areas of chess are covered here. Stewart highlights the principles of successful opening play and outlines an easy-to-learn starting repertoire. He also examines positional play, defensive resilience, typical mistakes and how to avoid them, tournament strategy, clock management, how to study chess and much more besides. This book is packed with tips and practical advice for beginners and intermediate players, and anyone wishing to improve their mental approach to chess.

- An essential guide to chess psychology
- Covers opening, middlegame and endgame play
- Ideal for beginners and intermediate players

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